

"A person can be trained to write well, but no amount of training can bring a person without superb, natural talent to captivate the reader as [Umm Zakiyyah] does..."

— Dr. Robert D. Crane, advisor to former US President Nixon



A Voice

A NOVEL

UMM
ZAKIYYAH

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The sequel to

If I Should Speak

A Novel



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The Sequel to *If I Should Speak*

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By Umm Zakiyyah

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Dedication

For those who have submitted and
those who have not, but will.



One

Euphoria. The feeling was poetic in the way it swept over her like a gentle breeze. The coolness enveloped her. Became her. Remained. This Tamika pondered as she placed a book in the cardboard box on her bed, the motion slowed as the realization came to her and gave name to what she had been unable to.

A month. It had only been a month since she recited the words that transformed her—redefined her and gave her life. She hadn't expected to feel anything but relief. Because the decision to become Muslim wasn't really a decision at all. It was the silencing of an incessant nagging that would not quiet on its own. Reciting the words was merely a formal confirmation of what she already knew—what she had somehow always known.

Surrender. That was the definition of Islam itself, she'd been told. And how well it described what converting to Islam actually was.

"Is that *you*?"

Aminah's voice startled her in its abruptness. It wasn't the first time Tamika was reminded suddenly of her roommate's presence. They spent their evenings studying in the same small university apartment and slept in the same room each night, yet, still, Tamika often forgot her roommate was there. It was a human flaw, she supposed, to adapt to routine so profoundly that one eventually grew unconscious of it.

"What?" Tamika echoed Aminah's laughter as she turned away from the box to look at her roommate.

Aminah's ash brown hair fell over her shoulder in a heap as she bent over to pick up the photograph that had fallen to the floor. Her ponytail fell back in place as she stood, and her green eyes widened. She grinned as she pulled the picture closer to get a better look.

Self-conscious, Tamika too grinned, wondering what Aminah was looking at. Holding a book, Tamika walked over to where her roommate stood and peered over her shoulder at the picture. Aminah's thin pale thumb covered most of the right side of the photograph, but Tamika immediately recognized the scene. Tamika stood in front of her old high school building with her hands on her hips, leaning forward and sticking out her tongue playfully. It wasn't a flattering photograph, and Tamika had long planned to rip it up and throw it in the trash. She had tucked it in the back of one of her albums and forgotten about it.

"Oh that?" She waved her hand dismissively and walked back to her bed, a smile still on her face as she shook her head and continued packing.

It was the first week of May, two weeks before summer vacation, and the roommates had decided to pack early in preparation to go home.

Tamika could hardly believe the end of the year was actually upon them. Only a month before, time seemed to crawl. The night of the Spring Formal still taunted her, and she longed to escape it. And home would be her only refuge, or so she hoped.

Tamika should have known the year would not be an easy one. Living with Jennifer could have told her that.

It was true that Tamika and Jennifer were unlikely roommates from the start. Tamika was an African-American raised in a Milwaukee city home. Her mother was the head of household, and Tamika never knew her father. College was a word spoken on television and in movies, read about in books, but its reality didn't exist for Tamika's family. The system. Racism. Inner-city schools. There were a host of excuses why their heads hit the glass ceiling before they could enter the room. Latonya had been their first hope. She was an honor roll student and had even begun college coursework while she was still in high school. There was talk about her testing out of school and going to college full time. But Latonya had something stronger pulling her. Their mother told her to be careful. To watch herself. To not let them boys sweet-talk her.

When Latonya became pregnant and insisted on keeping the baby, even if it meant giving up college—and school, she became a nonperson in the family. Thelma's standoff with her oldest daughter culminated in Latonya being kicked out of the house. There was no empathy for a heinous crime as teenage pregnancy, even if it was the same one that had kept Thelma out of college herself.

The responsibility should have fallen on Philip's shoulders. He was Latonya's twin brother, a year older than Tamika. But he and school were always at odds, and a C on his report card was counted as a gift from God himself. Thelma's battle with her son was to keep him off the streets and out of jail. If she could win just that, she would be a grateful mother.

Tamika felt the weight of Thelma's expectation before it was placed on her. And she welcomed it—at least initially. When it was finally her sole responsibility to honor the family, Tamika was obliged. She had always been Thelma's favorite, the amenable child. It was a twinge of envy that Tamika felt when Latonya, with all her good grades and college classes, was getting all the attention. Tamika had good grades too and was on the honor roll, but her success was overshadowed by her sister's. With her sister estranged, Tamika had the opportunity to prove herself as Tamika Douglass the individual instead of Latonya Douglass's little sister.

Tamika's scholarship to college was the first milestone in her quest to be the first in the family to hold a college degree. It didn't hurt that Streamsdale University was respected for its high academic standards. When another less prominent college offered her a full scholarship, she turned it down, though the staff and student body were predominantly African-American and despite the fact that she had her heart set on it since

most of her friends would go there. Instead, she would fulfill her mother's wishes by attending Streamsdale in a small, quiet, White suburban town named after the school. Her only solace was that the college town was less than an hour from Atlanta, a city coined the Black Mecca, and it was this succor that gave her the strength to live so far from home.

Reality hit Tamika almost immediately after she arrived at Streamsdale. It was in the middle of Freshman Orientation when she realized that she never wanted to go to college. Her dream was to become a famous singer. It was her mother who convinced her that singing was an impossible career and that she would be nothing in this world without a college degree.

The idea of college had always frightened Tamika. Anything that represented the "real world" gave her anxiety. She excelled in high school, she reasoned, only because she was sheltered from reality. The principal of the school was Black. Many of her teachers were Black. And more than eighty percent of the students were Black. Television and books were her only windows into the world of vices like racism and sexism. Somehow she had come to accept that those things were "the past," and any evidence of them existing today were rare, perpetrated only by an ignorant, uneducated person who would shout at the television between sips of whiskey and had little, if any, social status.

It was at work that she realized racism and sexism were bigger and uglier than she imagined. Pay differentials. Favoritism. Mistreatment. They began to define her days until she imagined that bigotry was the heartbeat of American society. The world around her became foreign. Dangerous. Trust was felt only when accompanied by apprehension. She was terrified. Of work, coworkers, and, finally, herself.

How did she fit into the perverse puzzle? Or did she fit at all? What did it take to actually make it in the world? If propriety, honesty, and hard work weren't the keys to success, what were?

Ironically, high school, which was supposed to prepare her for the real world, became a refuge from it. She was afraid to graduate though she anticipated it. She was petrified of going to college though she worked hard for it. Eventually, she was terrified of success itself. What would it mean if she actually did succeed? Perhaps Philip was right. To hell with the system. To hell with life. To hell with success. Why go to school if society gave you rules it didn't play by? Why study if success depended on who you knew and not who you were? *If you wanna make it in the world, you gotta do what they do*, was his motto—and that was whatever it took to survive.

Tamika initially counted it as luck, though she now knew better, that her roommate during freshman year was Black in a predominantly White school. Similar backgrounds, fears, and reasons for coming to college made Makisha and Tamika friends from the start. They did nothing alone. They ate lunch together, studied together, went to church together, and

partied together. Friday and Saturday nights were their favorite nights of the week, when they drove to Atlanta, where there was never a dearth of parties to choose from. Tamika's freshman year was so fulfilling that it was deceptive. When she returned to Streamdale for her sophomore year, nothing had prepared her for what was to come.

It was both a sense of sadness and joy Tamika had felt when Makisha's name was randomly selected to have a single that year. Tamika was sad because they could no longer be roommates, but she was happy for her best friend. It was every college student's dream to live alone, a privilege enjoyed only by resident advisors and those wealthy enough to afford off-campus apartments. As Makisha decided how she would set up her room, Tamika grew anxious about living in hers. Who would be her roommate? Would she be Black? If so, would they be friends? If not, *could* they be friends?

Her anxiety inspired an array of roommate possibilities in her mind. Korean. Indian. Spanish. West African. The possibility of living with a White student was in the back of her mind, but, for some reason, she never imagined it would actually happen. The tension between Black and White roommates was so strong that she imagined the school sanctioned the arrangement only out of pure moral—or quota—obligation.

Tamika was just as taken aback as Jennifer when they met that first day. But they handled it with dutiful affability. They weren't surprised when they had their share of disagreements. All roommates did. But when their disagreements grew dangerously tense, Tamika had doubts about their ability to live together.

It was a Wednesday evening in February when their contempt for each other, which was usually displayed in verbal altercations, finally culminated in a physical fight. Jennifer's screams summoned the resident advisor to the room just as Tamika pressed Jennifer's arms against the floor. Despite the blood stained scratches on Tamika's face and protruding hair earned from Jennifer's scratching and yanking, Mandy saw Tamika as the aggressor. It was Mandy's duty to report the case, Tamika knew, but was it her duty to testify against her in a Conduct Board hearing when she hadn't even seen the fight?

Tamika was infuriated as she listened to Jennifer and Mandy's testimony the following evening. She couldn't imagine any of the board members taking this squabble seriously, let alone entertain such a ridiculous charge as physical assault. When she was informed of the board's decision the next morning, she was stunned. Guilty? Were they joking? She wanted to laugh, but the vicious irony of it numbed her in disbelief. She had only restrained Jennifer's arms and pushed her in an attempt to protect herself from attack. That Jennifer hit her head, causing the bleeding, wasn't her fault. And it definitely wasn't a case of assault. At most, it was a fight. At least, it was self-defense. Apparently, the board disagreed.

The hardest part of coming to terms with the charge was that Dr. Sanders, her religion professor, was on the board. He was the first African-American professor she had at the university, and he was also her favorite. How could he? Was he like the African-Americans she heard about, who only wanted a piece of the American pie and didn't care if they stepped on their own along the way? It was only time and necessity that allowed her to move on, even if she would never get over it. But at the time, she was hardly appreciative of being forced to move out of her room.

No one wanted to live in Streamsdale University Apartments except those who had at least three other friends they could live with. Though the idea of living in an apartment was appealing to students, privacy and peace of mind were more important. Sleeping in a room, even if a room in an apartment, with three other students wasn't a popular choice for students. Most students, if they could not afford an off-campus apartment, settled for the traditional dormitory arrangement. At least then they would live with only one other person. That way, the chances of roommate tension, if not eliminated, were lessened. As a result, the university apartments were comprised of mostly two types of students. Really good friends who handpicked each other, and unfortunate students forced to live with as many as three strangers—strangers forced to live together because of roommate fallouts.

It was a Monday, less than a week after the physical assault verdict, when Tamika met her first new roommate. The young woman emerged from the bathroom a few minutes after Tamika arrived in the apartment. The student was tall and slender and wore a black bathrobe with a matching towel neatly wrapped around her head, accenting her smooth tan complexion. When she smiled, she revealed dimples that illuminated the beauty of her face. It was then that Tamika recognized her. An inquiry confirmed that the young woman was indeed Dee, the student who was not only known for her academic prowess but who won almost every beauty contest and talent show she entered.

Dee's beauty, like her singing voice, was second to none. Tamika and nearly all Streamsdale students and residents of Atlanta and its suburbs admired her and were proud to be connected to her in some way. Tamika had met Dee in person only once, when she congratulated her after a show. She doubted that Dee would recall the encounter. Tamika was one in hundreds, if not thousands, of fans who eagerly awaited the opportunity to meet Dee personally and earn bragging rights. But unlike others, Tamika's desire to know Dee wasn't merely out of admiration. Dee was a role model for her. Dee had succeeded in the two most significant areas of Tamika's life. College and singing. Though Dee's prominence had not yet reached the level of fame, to her admirers, it made no difference. Dee was Dee. And that was more than anyone could say about herself.

As Tamika chatted with Dee the day she moved in, she realized that

moving in the apartment wasn't a case of bad luck. God was giving her the opportunity of a lifetime. Finally, she didn't have to choose between her mother and herself. She could please her mother by continuing college and please herself by being a singer. And Dee was living proof.

Tamika had been so intoxicated by the friendly exchange with Dee that she momentarily forgot her circumstances. It was Dee's comment about another roommate that reminded Tamika that her dream come true wouldn't be without its thorns. Dee joked that Tamika, who had expressed that she was thinking of majoring in religion, would get along well with Aminah, her other roommate, who absolutely loved the subject. But Aminah's love of religion wasn't because she loved studying about it. She loved living it. As a Muslim.

Tamika's heart sank at the news. She wasn't expecting to live with a Muslim. She had come to accept that her roommates could be any race, and she had already mentally prepared herself for whatever that would mean. But somehow she imagined the variety of possibilities as one-dimensional. Racial. It was an epiphany she felt right then. The school wasn't full of Christians. The possibility of living with a heathen had never entered her mind. Though she knew little of Muslims and had never met one, she knew enough to know she didn't want one as a roommate.

Dee was smiling as she shared this little bit of news. But Tamika was not. And Tamika wasn't smiling when Dee told her that she and Aminah would get along fine. There were two other students who had lived with them at the beginning of the year, Dee informed Tamika, but after having "enough of Aminah," they moved out. Tamika detected a hint of sarcasm in Dee's voice as she assured her that she and Aminah would be fine. Tamika took it as Dee's way of warning her. Aminah wasn't only a Muslim, Dee told her, but a strict one. The word Muslim itself was synonymous with extremism in Tamika's mind. If a person could be a strict extremist, the results were terrifying.

That wouldn't be Tamika's last bit of news for the day. Dee went on to tell Tamika that she and Aminah not only grew up together but were actually good friends. What a talented model and singer from Cuba had in common with an extremist Muslim, likely from the deserts of Arabia, was beyond Tamika. But a moment later she knew.

"And it doesn't bother you that she's Muslim?" Tamika had asked.

The reply to Tamika's question had been a half smile and a raised eyebrow. "If Aminah was here, she'd lecture me if she heard you say that."

Tamika creased her forehead in confusion. "Why?"

"Because I'm Muslim too."

Had it been only three months? It was hard to believe. So much had happened since then that it seemed implausible that such a brief period in life could hold so much. Dee was dead. Tamika was Muslim. And she and Aminah were friends.

But the events of the month before still cast a shadow on them. There was a gaping distance between them that no amount of laughter or words could bridge. Yet there was the euphoria.

The moment it enveloped her Tamika thought it was a coping mechanism. A sense of denial. A trick of the mind. To escape grief was to escape sobriety. But she now realized she was wrong.

When Tamika learned of Dee's death, a storm of emotions exploded. Anger. Suffocation. And a sense of betrayal. She was powerless to resist how the world became surreal. Dark. Ominous. And cruel.

Finally, she understood. Before then she had only known. But knowledge and understanding were rarely one.

Tamika had sat next to Makisha and listened to Dee's eulogies in the chapel the Sunday after the car accident, but it was her own life that distressed her as she listened to the students recount Dee's. Tamika was in the passenger seat when the car rammed into the driver's side and killed Dee, yet she was home two nights later with nothing to speak of except a weak body that needed lots of rest.

Dee's beautiful voice rang throughout the chapel as her songs were played during the memorial. Tamika felt tears of shame glisten in her eyes as the enchanting, melodious songs harangued her. When grief overtook her during the eulogies, it was not Dee's death that grieved her, but her own.

From the moment Tamika first saw Dee on stage, there was a bond between them. The bond wasn't distant like admiration of one unreachable, but one felt in the soul. When they finally met, though a mere handshake and a forgotten moment for Dee, Tamika's exhilaration was overwhelming. Tamika was restless to know her better and could only dream of the honor of saying she actually did. She went to every concert she could and never tired of listening to Dee sing. Though Tamika could make an exhaustive list of famous singers she liked, none came close to evoking the fondness she felt for Dee.

The whys and hows were never asked for the emotions of the heart. Adoration and love were miracles, small gifts from God. If there was more to them, it was more principled to avoid delving into the unknown. The essence of the heart's beauty was its mystery. To uncover it was impossible, and seeking to unveil it was a crime against life itself.

But perhaps Tamika had it all wrong.

The video screen in the chapel had shown Dee laughing and joking during a beauty contest, and Tamika had caught a glimpse of Dee's eyes. It was only for a brief moment that Dee looked into the camera, yet that had been enough. The glance nearly numbed Tamika, and her heart made her body too heavy for the bench. It was pity she felt for Dee at that moment, and it was agonizing to withstand. When tears spilled from her eyes, it was a selfish grief. It was a grief of regret. A grief of submission. A grief over her own death.

Life was uncanny in its symbolism. And its effect could only be felt, never explained. There were some words the tongue could never speak and only the heart could understand. It was this Tamika realized during the memorial. It was a feeling too powerful to escape and too personal to share. Tears were the only testimony to her revelation. The tears of others only made her experience more impossible to deny. And more tangible in its embrace.

She was right when she suspected that being placed in a room with Dee was too monumental to be attributed to coincidence or luck, Tamika realized as she sat in the chapel. Coincidence had no higher plan, and luck did not exist. Dee—Durrah—had fascinated her, inspired her, because she represented Tamika herself. Dee was the part of Tamika that Tamika had yet to taste. But like any ephemeral pleasure of the world, the sweetness of fame was only tasted, never relished. Yet even the taste was unfulfilling because it didn't emanate from within. It depended solely on the eyes and tongues of others, and one no longer belonged to herself. For the famous, fame was more an appetite than anything satiating in itself. But the desire for the nonexistent drove both the famous and their wanna-bes nearly insane in the search.

That destructive desire killed Dee. And Dee's death obliterated it from Tamika's heart.

Tamika's mourning during the service was evoked by a painful realization of self. She had been born more than eighteen years ago, yet she hadn't known life until then. As a Christian, she was "born again," and for the first time, she knew what that meant. She had thought Jesus died for her, and now he really did. No longer was he her savior. No longer was he God's son. No longer was he God.

It wasn't volition that inspired the transformation. Entering Islam was merely accepting an appointment from God. That night when she returned from the chapel and found Aminah in the apartment, she knew what she had to do. Reciting the words was so monumental, so moving that her entire body felt the power of each word. With each utterance her body lightened, her heart eased, and serenity enveloped her until she felt she could float. The relief was intoxicating, and at that moment, she could only weep. The moment was one of mourning. They had lost Dee. And it was painful that Dee wasn't there to witness, to join in. Yet it was one of celebration, of exuberance, and its enjoyment was strengthened in the warm embrace of Aminah's arms.

Upon Aminah's instruction, Tamika had taken the ritual bath, *ghusl*, which Muslims performed to remove ceremonial impurities. The bath was a spiritual experience for Tamika. It was as if she were washing away her past. She was a new person. Born again.

When she stepped from the bath, she felt a cleanliness that penetrated the soul. And there was a powerful feeling that lingered and soothed. The

feeling was ambiguous in its nature but acute in its effect. Tamika couldn't deny the phenomenal way it inspired her to move on. A sense of sadness lingered but never enough to weigh her down with distress. Islam had given her new life, and it was with eagerness she accepted the gift.

Yet Tamika, like Aminah, was still adjusting to life without Dee. The apartment carried an air of melancholy that seemed to hover like a dark cloud over each room. Dee's furniture sat lifeless, untouched, etched in loneliness. Neither dared to suggest it be removed. Neither dared to move it herself.

It wasn't an easy task for either of them, but they somehow moved on. They attended classes and maintained decent grades. Presently, they were embarking upon final exams, and it was only a matter of time before they would be set free.

They studied in the apartment mostly. It was difficult to study anywhere else. For students, the presence of Tamika or Aminah was taken as an opportunity to ask about Dee. The students meant no harm, this Tamika understood. But constant reminders of their loss were too much to bear, especially at the end of school.

"That was when I was like fifteen years old," Tamika said, hoping to downplay the significance of the picture. Still grinning, she lifted her gaze to her roommate as she placed more books in the box. Aminah was facing Tamika now and walking toward her, still amused by the picture. Her green eyes sparkled in laughter, reminding Tamika of the moment she met her. Pale skin and green eyes, wearing Arab dress. And Dee had told her that Aminah was Black.

Aminah burst out laughing. "You look ridiculous!"

"Thanks for the compliment."

Friendly sarcasm was their way of bonding. For Tamika it was healing. Perhaps it was soothing because it assured her that there was more to Aminah than being Muslim and teaching those who were not.

"Anytime." Aminah set the photograph on Tamika's bed and paused as she noticed a stack of photo albums next to the box Tamika was packing. She started to lift one then hesitated. "You mind?"

"So long as you don't laugh at me. I was a lot different then."

"Different how?" Aminah eyed Tamika playfully as she toted the large album to her bed, where she sat down and opened it, inviting herself to indulge.

Tamika grinned. "Different different."

Placing the last book in the box, Tamika picked up the packaging tape and tore off a strip, using clinched teeth. She taped the box closed and smoothed the surface with her palm.

"Is this you?"

Tamika glanced up as Aminah held up the album for her to see. "Yeah." Tamika walked over to the dresser and pulled a drawer open. She tossed things aside as she searched for a permanent marker.

“Wow. *BarakAllaahufEEK!*”

Unsure how to respond, Tamika smiled. She removed the marker from the drawer and shut it. She never knew how to take compliments. They always made her self-conscious. She doubted that it was correct to say thank you. It was God who created her, and she didn't think of herself as attractive. She was average. Not ugly, but nothing great. Thelma often said Tamika was the most beautiful child in the world. But mother's opinions didn't count. Yet Tamika couldn't help feeling proud whenever her mother described her. Almond brown eyes. Honey brown skin, soft to the touch. And a smile that made her face glow and brighten the whole room. It was poetic and motherly. Tamika could only laugh. She only wondered how much of it was true.

“Look at you!” As Aminah laughed, Tamika grinned from where she stood, not bothering to walk over and see the picture. Still smiling, she leaned forward and wrote “BOOKS” on the box.

It was only in the past month that Tamika saw the similarities between Aminah and Dee. Before becoming Muslim, Tamika saw Aminah and Dee as opposites, and it was difficult to imagine they had anything in common except their families' religion. Dee was funny, outgoing and down-to-earth, and Aminah was dull, self-righteous, and took life much more seriously than it deserved. Aminah intimidated Tamika with her need to always be right, even when others didn't care either way. Tamika was especially irritated with Aminah's nagging of Dee, whether to pray and cover in Islamic garb or to respect Islam. Why couldn't she just worry about herself?

It was amazing how differently things looked from the other side. No, she didn't agree with everything Aminah did or how she did it. But she did understand her better. Tamika could only wonder how she would have dealt with Dee had she been in Aminah's shoes.

The room was silent, and for several minutes the only sounds that could be heard were Aminah turning the pages of Tamika's photo album and Tamika packing another box.

“Is this your mom?”

Aminah's voice interrupted Tamika's thoughts, and she glanced up from the box.

“Who?”

Aminah lifted the album so Tamika could see, but the photograph was too small. Tamika placed the stack of CDs in the box and walked over to her roommate before standing at Aminah's shoulder to get a better look.

“Yeah.”

“She looks like she's really nice.”

Tamika smiled, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. She decided against being harsh in her honesty. “She is sometimes.”

“Sometimes? I'm sure she's a sweetheart.”

Tamika sat next to Aminah on the bed, rewarding herself with a break

from packing. “Yeah, she is. I guess it’s just that I know my mother.”

“Oh, don’t we all.”

Aminah studied the rest of the pictures on the page in silence, and Tamika became lost in her thoughts. There was so much more she could have said, but she withheld. Her gaze was on the photograph of her mother, but her mind was elsewhere.

How would it be when she went home? Would her mother accept her? Would they get along? The questions exhausted her, and she wished she could skip summer break.

Tamika had talked to her mother several times since Dee’s death and sought comfort in Thelma’s voice. It was soothing to listen to someone who loved her giving advice in hard times. She shared with her mother how difficult it was without Dee, how she had not sung a single song since the accident. It was as if she lost her voice and felt no inclination to find it. Her mother listened patiently to her struggles, and Tamika didn’t hold back. She told her mother of her ups and downs, her good days and bad days, and how everything in life looked different. But she had yet to tell her mother of her conversion to Islam.

There were moments when Tamika felt she should tell her, especially when they had conversations about how Dee’s death affected her life. But when she imagined how it would break her mother’s heart, her spirit weakened her into silence.

Tamika was her mother’s pride and joy. In many ways, she was her only child. Latonya and Philip made it clear that their relationship with Thelma was nothing more than blood and circumstance. No other familial rights would be enjoyed. They viewed their mother as selfish, heartless, and domineering, and they were not shy to express it, even to her. They resented that she turned her back on Latonya in her most difficult time, and it pained them more that her selfishness didn’t break enough to be a part of her grandchild’s life. They blamed Thelma for their father’s absence although this was never expressed in words. That would cut too deep, even for them. It was easier to live without uttering his name, even if only to place blame where blame was due. Tamika knew what they felt. She could see it in their eyes, catch hints in their words, and sense it in their ways.

Tamika felt caught in the crossfire. She saw what they saw, but she had another perspective. Thelma’s selfishness was her strong love for her children. She wanted them to do their best without making the mistakes she made. Her heartlessness was her determination to stand up for right and not be swayed by emotions. And her domineeringness was her violent love for her children, pushing her to protect them from life’s painful falls. But her siblings disagreed.

To them, Tamika was siding with their mother against them. To Tamika, there were no sides. Each of them—Latonya, Philip, and her mother—represented a part of her. Her mother was her heart and her sib-

lings her self. One without the other bore no use in life. How could she give up her heart and be left with mere flesh and blood? And how could she choose a beating heart with no body to enclose it and give it life? What they perceived as warring sides, she perceived as the tearing apart of herself. There were no winners in the fight. The fight itself doomed them all to loss before any blows were felt.

Aminah turned the page. "Who are they?"

Tamika's eyes followed Aminah's gaze. "Latonya and Philip."

"Your sister and brother?"

"Yeah."

There was a brief silence. "When was this?"

"A couple of years ago, after my graduation."

"Who's the little girl?"

"Nikki, my niece. Well, her real name's Nicole."

Aminah giggled. "She's cute."

Tamika forced a smile.

"How old is she?"

"She must be about four now."

"You don't know?" Aminah eyed her teasingly.

"I only saw her at my graduation." Tamika forced laughter, concealing her hurt. "I was lucky to even see her then."

Aminah turned the page silently, avoiding eye contact with her roommate. She didn't want Tamika to feel obligated to explain.

"I mean," Tamika's voice interrupted the silence as she sought answers more for herself than her roommate, "sometimes I wanna know where Tonya is 'cause I worry about her a lot. I feel really bad about everything."

"Why's that?" Aminah sensed Tamika needed to talk.

"It's only because of my mom that I don't talk to her anymore." She forced laughter. "It doesn't make any sense."

"What about Philip?"

"I haven't talked to him since my graduation either, but not because of my mom. He's just doing his own thing. I really think he just resents how our mother did Tonya when she got pregnant. And so he kind of just split, if you know what I mean."

"Does he call you?"

Tamika shook her head. "He doesn't know my number or anything. Once I went to college, that was pretty much the end of keepin' in touch. Unless he called home to get my information." She forced laughter. "And I'm pretty sure he ain't tryin' to do that."

Aminah stared at the album thoughtfully. "But you should try and keep in touch with them."

Tamika sucked her teeth. "I know, but that's pretty much impossible now."

"Maybe it's not. If you look 'em up, you'll probably find them. Maybe

not as soon as you like, but they have to be somewhere.”

“I suppose.” Tamika reached forward and turned the page. “I guess I pretty much figured if they wanna talk, they know where I am.”

“I thought they didn’t know.”

“They don’t know my number, but they know I go to Streamsdale. I told ‘em at graduation.”

“Maybe they don’t know.”

“They know. It’s not like my family’s got money to send me anywhere else.”

“But Streamsdale’s expensive.”

“I have a scholarship.”

Aminah nodded. “Still, you never know.”

“Maybe not. But if they weren’t sure, they could call the school.”

“Yeah, but you know how that goes. Most schools don’t give out your information to anyone, even if they claim to be family. It’s standard policy.” She studied the pictures on the page. “You could just call them.”

Tamika stood and headed toward her bed. “Maybe you’re right. But I’ll worry about that when I’m graduating from college, you know, for some major event.” She laughed as she sorted through the books and CDs stacked on her bed. “Otherwise, they’d be like, ‘What are you callin’ me for?’”

There was a long pause, and Aminah closed the photo album. “What makes you think they don’t wanna talk to you?”

Tamika was silent as she picked up a stack of books and placed them in a box. “Honestly, I don’t know. I guess it’s just that since everything happened, I could tell Tonya resented that my mom favored me, telling me don’t be like her and stuff like that. So I guess Tonya was like, whatever, to both of us.”

“What about Philip?”

“He’s just siding with Tonya and decided to leave Mom and ‘Momma’s girl’ alone, if you now what I mean.”

Aminah nodded, a reflective expression on her face.

“But I don’t get that,” Tamika said, shaking her head and forcing laughter. “I didn’t do anything. The whole time everything happened, I didn’t say a word. So I don’t know how I got branded a nonperson in their lives. But if they wanna be left alone, fine with me.”

It was a half-hour later that Tamika sat on the couch and opened a book to study for her exams.

“Tamika?”

Tamika looked up to find Aminah approaching her, carrying a chemistry book in her hand. Aminah appeared reluctant to go on, and Tamika cringed. She hoped it was nothing serious.

“You know, about your brother and sister.”

“Mm, hm.” Tamika nodded as her gaze fell back to her book.

“You should try to get in touch with them.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“No, I mean, for real.”

Sensing this was important to Aminah, Tamika met her gaze.

Aminah sighed, apparently unsure how to explain. “You have to keep ties with your family.”

“They should keep ties with me.”

“No, I mean, because you’re Muslim.”

Tamika gathered her eyebrows and waited for an explanation.

“Keeping ties with family is one of the most important things in Islam.”

Aminah’s voice was gentle, and Tamika could tell she was trying to be nice.

“Is it like a sin or something if you don’t?”

Aminah nodded regretfully. “Yeah, it is.”

Tamika let out a long sigh. Momentarily, she forgot about her exams. Her gaze lifted to the vertical blinds, whose slight openings gave a sketchy view of the trees and grass. The view was normally soothing, intoxicating in the calm it evoked. But right then Tamika felt detached and found herself reflecting on the euphoria that was fading inside.

It was the dread of facing her mother that made her realize something had changed. When she first became Muslim, nothing mattered but Islam itself. She felt as if she could conquer the world. Perhaps it was the same feeling she had felt in high school when the prospect of college was far away. But now college was her refuge and home the real world.

The euphoria was replaced by a sense of self-determination, and for that she couldn’t complain. But the self-determination was just that, a determination experienced alone. How could she make her mother understand or, at the very least, accept her change? How could she convince her mother that this was something she wanted, needed, for herself? How could she tell her mother that Islam, not Christianity, was what she wanted in life?

Fear. That was what now swept over her. And it wasn’t like a gentle breeze. The feeling was burdensome, nearly tortuous in its effect. She hated the idea of hurting her mother, but she couldn’t help what her heart believed. Facing her mother was inevitable, yet she feared she was unable to.

And now her brother and sister. Did she have to face them too?

For more than two years, Tamika had tried to shut the thought of her brother and sister out of her mind. She contented herself with life without them. She put a mental barrier between her and them, and it was this that allowed her to move on. Whenever thoughts of them entered her mind, she pushed them away. But still, her love for them lingered in her heart. There was no barrier strong enough to block what she felt.

But she didn’t want to think of her brother and sister right then. It was too much to bear. Aminah was right, that much she knew. She needed to

get back in touch. But her mind was consumed with the approaching summer vacation. Facing her mother was enough to think about. She didn't need the added stress.

Aminah started to say more but decided against it and a moment later walked away. Tamika watched her roommate enter the bedroom. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't be angry with Aminah. She admired her a great deal. Aminah lost her childhood friend, and still she was strong. Dee's death couldn't have hurt Tamika more than it hurt her. Aminah and Dee grew up together and were best friends. They shared memories that Tamika would never know. That Aminah was able to keep going was amazing, and Tamika could only pray she could do the same.

There were times when Tamika didn't feel like hearing Aminah, but it was her own fear that inspired this reaction. What Aminah said about Islam always made sense, and Tamika didn't always want to make sense. Aminah wasn't perfect, but there was a glow about her, a glow that seemed to emanate from the heart. Tamika recognized it as Aminah's sincere commitment to Islam.

There was something about all Muslims that distinguished them from other people. Tamika had noticed this before she was Muslim herself. It was as if Muslims carried with them the essence of spirituality, and others could only hope for a glimmer of it. Tamika had heard that Muslims sought to be godlike in their striving against sin. People were born in sin, she was told, and it was futile for Muslims to deny this basic truth. But she now knew better because she was seeing for herself. Muslims viewed sin more as an inclination than a curse from birth. Human action, both good and bad, was a matter of choice. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, taught that all of the children of Adam erred. But the best were those who repented. Sincere repentance, Tamika reflected. That was Muslims' distinguishing trait.

Two

The last weeks of school passed too quickly. Tamika and Aminah had anticipated school ending, but when it did, they felt as if it had gone too fast. Even the dreaded final exams were over, and there was nothing left to do but face summer head-on.

It was a Wednesday afternoon in mid-May, and the campus was filling with moving trucks and students' families coming to take them home for the summer. Tamika's mother was unable to drive down to pick her up this year as she had done the year before. Things at work were tight, and Thelma felt it unwise to take off if it wasn't an emergency. People were being laid off, and although she had accrued both sick days and vacation leave, she would wait and use the hours when things loosened up a bit. Tamika told her mother not to worry. She would take a flight home and put her belongings in storage. She would offset the storage cost by finding a student to share the space. But school was over, and she had found no one. Normally, she would ask Makisha, but now that was impossible because Makisha rarely spoke to her after she accepted Islam. Tamika had asked Aminah what she thought she should do.

"You can just load your stuff into our moving truck."

Tamika laughed. "And then what? I still need somewhere to put it."

"We can just take it home with us."

Tamika stood in the center of the living room and placed her hands on her hips. The room still bore the attractive set up that it had when she first moved in and met Dee for the first time. But the once cozy atmosphere was gone. The dark gray couch with a black floral design still sat near the vertical blinds that overlooked the balcony. The jet-black coffee table with a glass top still sat in front of it, but the books and magazines had been removed and packed away in boxes. The tall shiny black vase with gold trim at the mouth still adorned the large peacock feathers that it held. The black and gray pillows that had once aligned the wall in a cozy design now sat in a pile next to the couch. The gold-trimmed black frames that enclosed poetry and famous quotes were now hidden in a cardboard box labeled "Wall Hangings" in the fading ink of a black permanent marker. The three-unit black shelves that had stored the books that led Tamika to Islam were now empty. As it had been when she first moved in, her stacks of boxes created an eye sore in the room.

Tamika bit her lower lip as her eyes traced the boxes stacked in front of the empty shelves that had once belonged to Dee. Her shoulder-length hair was pulled back in a bun, partially hidden under the navy blue and white bandana she had tied on her head before helping Aminah clean. Her pale yellow T-shirt was dingy from dusting and scrubbing floors. The lower

front of it was damp with dishwater and was now tied in a heavy knot that hung at her waist. Her faded blue jeans clung to her hips, accenting her slim figure, and bore a ragged hole that exposed her left knee. But she was too tired and too sweaty to care. She considered the suggestion then shook her head. “I can’t let you do that.”

Aminah too surveyed the boxes, standing a few feet from Tamika. “We have space.” One hand was on her hip, and the other moved when she spoke. Her hair was damp from the day’s chores and was in a thick braid that hung a few inches down her back. The moisture gave her hair a dark rust color that seemed to fade into ash brown as it dried. She too wore a T-shirt, its faded black concealing evidence of the day’s work. But her once-white sweatpants were proof enough.

“But—”

“What other choice do you have?” Aminah was unable to keep from smiling as she met her roommate’s gaze.

“But I’ve been so much of a burden already.”

“That’s not true.”

“I’ll just pay for storage.”

“You still need a moving truck.”

“Then I can just, uh.” Tamika’s voice trailed off as she realized she barely had enough money for storage—even if she found someone to share the cost, let alone extra to rent a moving truck.

“Anyway, Sulayman’ll kill me if I told him I let you go broke when he could’ve just put the stuff with mine.”

Tamika grew silent at the mention of his name. There was still that awkwardness she felt about him, kindled by the contempt she had felt for him after reading his controversial articles in the school’s paper *A Voice*. She had never hated a name in print as much as she did his. She saw him as a self-righteous, arrogant student who had nothing better to do than judge others. She spent much of her freshman year venting to Makisha and her mother about him. Both agreed that he had a lot of gall to write unapologetically about issues like fornication and drinking. Who did he think he was? God’s messenger? Did he expect everyone to be perfect—like him? Never tempted to sin? Everyone wasn’t so righteous as to resist the temptations of sex and alcohol. Tamika imagined that he and his sister were the only ones.

She had been Muslim for a month, and still there was a part of her that resented him. Tamika knew her feelings were unjustly critical, but his words had opened up wounds that she had hoped to heal. She had made many mistakes before coming to college and had sought redemption through Christ. She dedicated herself to the church and finally became saved. With a new spiritual awareness, she preferred to forget about who she used to be and define herself by who she was. But his words were vivid reminders of what she had left behind.

Caught up in the social life of high school, she hadn't seen herself drowning. Parties and clubs were regular scenes for her, and they were always filled with alcohol, marijuana, and good-looking men. She dressed the part, played the part, and eventually became the part. She partied, drank, and did whatever everyone else did. And finally, as a cruel climax to her degenerate life, she became involved with a young man who was known for crushing hearts. It was a harsh introduction to the world of men. He would be the first and last boyfriend she had. Scarred by the experience, she turned to the church and vowed to give her life to God. When she came to college, she wanted to forget about her past sins. She attended church regularly, gave up drinking, and lived a celibate life. She had continued to go to parties, but nothing more.

"If it's not a problem." Tamika no longer cared either way. If Sulayman was going to be the subject of the discussion, she couldn't participate. She wasn't in the mood.

Aminah sucked her teeth and waved her hand. "Girl, it's not a problem."

"Thanks." Tamika didn't know what else to say.

"He'll be here tonight to pick up the couches and shelves."

Most of the furniture had belonged to Dee, and Aminah thought it best to take those things out first. They were taking up the most space in the apartment—and their hearts.

"Maybe we can fit some of your stuff in there tonight."

Tamika nodded, glancing around the living room to survey what little things she still needed to pack, only half-listening to Aminah talk.

Aminah started to return to the bedroom when she thought of something. She turned around to face Tamika. "When's your flight?"

"Friday morning."

"What time?"

"Seven."

"How are you getting there?"

Tamika was shy to respond. She knew what would come next. At times like this, she felt guilty. What had Tamika done to deserve all of the generosity Aminah displayed? Just months before, Tamika could barely stand her, and, surely, Aminah must have known. But now, it was as if they had always been friends. Tamika knew it was both her conversion to Islam and Dee's death that increased Aminah's concern and love for her. But still, it took some getting used to.

"I have a ride." She averted her gaze, pretending to look for something in the living room.

"Really?" Aminah creased her forehead as she searched her mind for who would have offered to give her a ride. Then it occurred to her what Tamika might have meant. "A taxi?"

Tamika groaned. Could Aminah see right through her? "Yeah, but it's not a big deal."

“We can take you.”

There Aminah was again, bringing Sulayman into everything. Tamika couldn't help wondering if Sulayman was aware that his sister volunteered him so much. She felt sorry for him. He probably felt obligated when his sister nagged him about her roommate. Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. What if he thought it was Tamika asking for his help? She hoped not!

“The taxi is fine, really.”

Aminah laughed. “I know that. And we'll take you still.” Without waiting for a response, she disappeared into the bedroom to finish packing.

Tamika took a deep breath and sighed. What could she say?

That night Tamika was seated on the couch in the living room reading a book. She was dressed in a long sleeved white silk blouse and a navy blue rayon floral skirt that she had picked out a couple of hours before. She had rewarded herself with a long hot shower after a day's work and chose a comfortable outfit to celebrate the occasion.

Aminah was taking a nap and had told Tamika that Sulayman should be at the apartment by 9:00 to pick up the furniture and whatever boxes could fit in the moving truck. Tamika knew the information was a heads-up. Aminah didn't want Tamika to be caught off guard when her brother arrived. Tamika was still growing accustomed to the idea of covering herself when men were present. She had taken the hint and decided to get fully dressed before sitting down to finish the novel she had started after finishing her finals. Her navy blue *khimaar* was lying on an arm of the couch. She would put it on once Sulayman arrived. She had grown used to covering her hair outside of the apartment, but it was difficult to get used to covering it inside.

A knock at the door startled her. She had been so engrossed in the book that she momentarily forgot where she was. Instinctively, she glanced at the clock. She remembered just then that Sulayman was due at nine. It was almost 10:00. Tamika stood. Her thoughts still lingered in the events of the story as she quickly placed the book face down on the couch.

“Who is it?” She picked up the *khimaar* and placed it on her head. Attempting to fasten the cloth under her chin, she realized she had forgotten the pin.

“Sulayman.”

The voice was deep and unfamiliar, and Tamika's heart began to pound in nervousness. “Uh, just a minute!”

She hurried to the bathroom, where she found some scarf pins lying on the sink counter. Holding the cloth in place with one hand, she picked up a pin with the other and quickly fastened it on the cloth under her chin. Before leaving the bathroom, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. She smiled beside herself, pleased with how the head cover complimented her features.

A second later, she was across the hall flicking on the bedroom light. “Aminah.” Her voice was a loud whisper. “Aminah,” she said a bit louder when her roommate didn’t budge. “Aminah!” Tamika hated shouting in such close proximity, but she didn’t want to keep Sulayman waiting.

Aminah sat up quickly. “Sulayman’s here?” She climbed out of bed.

“Yeah.” Tamika relaxed a bit, but her heart was still racing. Why was she so nervous?

“Has he been waiting long?” Aminah headed for the living room, and Tamika followed.

“Maybe a couple of minutes.”

Aminah paused before opening the door, checking her appearance. She was wearing a large white T-shirt that hung to her knees and baggy blue jeans. For a moment, she considered covering herself more but decided against it since it was only her brother. Hiding herself behind the door, she opened it slowly and greeted her brother to let him know it was she. “*As-salaamu-alaikum*?”

Sulayman hesitated.

“It’s okay. You can come in.”

His hesitation was out of respect for Tamika, this Tamika knew. She had grown accustomed to this aspect of Muslim etiquette. Muslim men customarily waited until women had time to cover themselves before entering a room.

Sulayman returned the Islamic greeting then stepped in cautiously. His eyes searched for his sister behind the door. He didn’t seem to notice Tamika standing near the couch.

He was dressed more casually than his usual slacks and button up shirt. He wore dark blue jeans and a T-shirt with “Islam” written on it in the shape of the United States. “Reach each and teach,” read the inscription under the design. Immediately, Tamika saw the resemblance.

Tamika had seen Sulayman on several occasions since she began attending Streamsdales University, but it wasn’t until she lived with Dee and Aminah that she discovered that he was Aminah’s brother. When she learned of their relationship, she didn’t think much of it, aside from her shock that the author of the infamous editorials was the brother of one of her roommates. But now, she saw that they favored each other.

Aminah was extremely fair with green eyes and could easily pass for being White, except that her wavy hair texture hinted to her father being bi-racial. Sulayman was also fair, but his complexion held a hint of brown, and anyone who saw him knew that he was at least partly African-American. Otherwise, he and Aminah’s features were the same. He had Aminah’s eyes and nose, and even their facial expressions were the same.

Normally, Tamika would notice sibling resemblance when she saw both of them for the first time, but Sulayman’s features were somewhat hidden behind his beard. He stood almost a foot taller than his sister, who

was a few inches shorter than Tamika herself, making his height just over six feet. He was thin, like his sister, but his build revealed athleticism, and Tamika guessed that he probably lifted weights. His demeanor was like Aminah's, calm, confident, and soft-spoken. But, like his sister, he wasn't shy when it came to Islam. His articles in the paper were proof of that. When it came to religion, both could easily be community activists although they would otherwise be considered laid back, and they both carried an air of spiritualism that was difficult not to respect.

He glanced up to greet Tamika and smiled politely before returning his gaze back to his sister. "*As-salaamu-'alaikum.*"

"*Wa-'alaiku-mus-salaam.*" Tamika too wore a polite smile and returned the greeting with ease, surprising herself. It had taken lots of practice before she was able to say it right. But Sulayman didn't seem to notice her achievement. He was talking to his sister a second later.

"You'll need to get dressed. I brought Omar with me to help carry some things."

"Oh." Aminah ran a palm over her hair. "Where is he?"

"Waiting in the hall."

"Give me a few minutes." Without thinking, she hurried from the living room and headed for the bedroom to get dressed, leaving Sulayman with Tamika in the living room.

"I'll wait in the hall," he called to his sister, who had already disappeared into her room. Without waiting for a reply, Sulayman left and let the door shut behind him.

The apartment became silent. Tamika's face grew hot in embarrassment, and she became upset. What was wrong with her? She scolded herself for being overly sensitive. It wasn't appropriate for men to be alone with women who were not family. She knew that.

But still. She felt as if she'd been slapped in the face. Couldn't he have at least addressed her before leaving? Yelling to Aminah, who wasn't even in the room, was rude.

"Are you alright?" Aminah appeared in the living room suddenly, fully dressed in a white *khimaar* and a charcoal colored *abayah*⁴.

Embarrassed that her feelings showed on her face, Tamika forced a smile and waved her hand. "Yeah. It's nothing."

"Where's Sulayman?"

"He wanted to wait in the hall."

Just then Aminah realized what she had done. She cupped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left like that."

"Don't worry about it. It's okay."

"*Astaghfirullah*⁵." The words were more for self-reproach than seeking forgiveness as she headed for the front door and opened it to let the men inside.

"You can come in now."

A second later, Sulayman and a young man Tamika assumed was Omar stepped in. Omar was about two inches shorter than Sulayman and was noticeably stocky in his build, which his white football jersey did not conceal. Tamika imagined he could be on the football team at his school. He wore a thin beard that was like a shadow on his dark brown face. When he greeted the roommates, Tamika could tell his personality was easy going and that laughing came easy for him.

“What do you need me to do?” Omar clasped his hands together, a wide smile developing on his face.

“Aminah?” Sulayman turned to his sister.

“You can take all the boxes and furniture in here.” She pointed her finger toward the couch and shelves. “Then, if anything else can fit, you can take the other boxes out of our room.”

“Alright.” Omar headed to the couch that Tamika had been sitting on when Sulayman arrived.

Sulayman followed him, and Omar started to crouch to lift the couch when he noticed a book on a cushion. His expression grew curious, and he walked around the couch to pick it up. As he studied the cover, a grin developed on his face.

Tamika’s heart raced nervously, and she mentally kicked herself for leaving the book in full view.

“Hmm.” He nodding approvingly, and Tamika’s cheeks grew hot. “Whose is this?” Still grinning, he held up the book.

Embarrassed for the roommates, Sulayman walked over and took the book from Omar and handed it to Aminah. “Let’s just get moving. It’s already late.”

“That’s my sister’s favorite author.” Omar was lifting one side of the couch as he spoke, oblivious to everyone’s discomfort in the room. Sulayman knelt to pick up the other side, and they began carrying the couch toward the door.

“Can you get the door?” Sulayman nodded his head toward the door as he spoke.

“Sure.” Aminah tucked the book under an arm and hurried to the door. She opened it wide and stood behind it to make sure she wasn’t in their way.

“We might have to tilt the couch a bit so it can fit through the door.” Sulayman’s voice was strained from the lifting.

“Got it.” Omar’s response was cheerful, and if he was straining, he was hiding it well. They tilted the couch, and after some maneuvering, they pushed the couch through the door.

Tamika was relieved when Aminah shut the door behind the men.

“I’m sorry.” Aminah handed Tamika her book and shook her head.

“That’s okay,” Tamika lied, smiling uncomfortably as she accepted the book.

“You’ll have to excuse Omar.” Aminah started to say that Omar had only been Muslim for a year, but she realized the statement might offend Tamika. “He’s just, uh, really friendly. So don’t mind him.”

“It’s okay, really.”

There was an awkward silence.

“I guess I’ll just pack this up.” Tamika forced laughter, glancing at the book in her hand as she headed for the bedroom without waiting for a response.

Inside the room, Tamika studied her novel before putting it in her shoulder bag. Her desire to read left her suddenly. She flipped through the pages and ran her hand across the cover. Maybe she would finish when she was on the plane. She found the page where she had stopped reading and folded the top corner to mark her place. She then slipped the book in her bag and zipped it shut.

Tamika’s body weakened in exhaustion. She needed to sleep. She decided to pray the night prayer alone so she could go to bed. She doubted she could face the men again that night.

Three

Tamika woke to the alarm for *Fajr*, the first prayer of the day that was prayed at dawn. She sat up in the dark room. As usual, Aminah was already awake, and Tamika could hear the water running in the bathroom across the hall as her roommate performed ablution for prayer. Tamika glanced at the clock and realized that the alarm had been sounding for more than twenty minutes. She stood, turned off the alarm then flicked on the room light. She rubbed her eyes as they adjusted.

The room's bareness was depressing, and she found herself dreading going home. Most of the boxes were gone, and the tops of the dresser and desks were empty.

"*As-salaamu-'alaikum.*" Aminah appeared in the doorway and smiled.

"*Wa-'alaiku-mus-salaam.*"

"I'll just pray my *Sunnah* prayers and wait for you in the living room," Aminah said, referring to the voluntary prayer that was customary for the Prophet to pray before the obligatory dawn prayer.

"Okay."

In the bathroom, Tamika performed ablution at the bathroom sink. She slowly performed the motions she had learned from Aminah. It was only in the past two weeks that she was able to complete the task without Aminah's supervision. It seemed that the only thing that came naturally to her was learning the Qur'an, perhaps because it was similar to singing. The recitation was poetic and melodious, yet more powerful and moving than music.

Her mind drifted to all she had to do today as she washed her arms and wiped her head and ears. This was her last day on campus before her flight in the morning, and she hadn't spoken to Makisha in weeks. After Tamika had begun to dress in Islamic garb, Makisha kept her distance. Tamika knew her friend disapproved of her decision to become Muslim. Makisha had warned her on several occasions against turning away from Christ. But what should it matter to her what Tamika believed? Or had their friendship been conditional—that Tamika believed as she did?

Tamika felt herself growing upset. Part of her couldn't wait to see Makisha to confront her. But she knew she shouldn't, especially when they wouldn't see each other again for months. Besides, what impression would Makisha have of Muslims if the first thing Tamika did was argue with her?

Tamika turned off the water and opened the bathroom door to leave. After covering in an *abayah* and *khimaar*, she joined her roommate in the living room. Aminah had finished praying her *Sunnah* and was reading the Qur'an while she waited for Tamika.

"You ready?"

Tamika nodded, noticing the bareness of the living room. Aminah stood to put the Qur'an on its stand. The small X-shaped stand sat lonely on the floor near the blinds, and Tamika's gaze lingered there as she thought of her return home.

Tamika folded her hands on her chest as she stood next to Aminah in prayer. She listened to Aminah recite the Qur'anic verses with ease, and she found herself wondering at her roommate's songlike tone. Tamika had never thought of Aminah as inclined to sing. But she could never ask her about it. It would only open up wounds that had been unable to heal. Singing was Dee's trademark—her victory and defeat.

Tamika quivered at the thought of Dee and was immediately reminded of her own soul. She had admired Dee only months before and had striven to be like her. But now the thought scared her.

Suddenly, Tamika felt sorry for Dee. Why did she have to die so soon? She loved Islam. Why had God taken her soul before she had a chance to start practicing the religion again?

A frightening realization came to her. Perhaps Dee would've never returned to Islam—even if she lived on. Maybe she was never going to change, even after marriage, as she had planned to. Maybe letting go of her faith and planning to return to it later was indicative of her succumbing to one of the oldest tricks of Satan. Lure them away with the promise that someday they'll do what's right, and once they submit, steer them away from the right path so that "someday" never came. Tamika could only pray she wouldn't too succumb.

The roommates finished prayer and sat in silent reflection. Tamika pondered the mercies of their Lord and the poverty of their souls. Without the guidance of God, their souls were doomed to a never-ending darkness in this world and the next. Confusion would define their lives. What was evil they would think righteous, and what was righteous they would think vile. They would indulge in idolatry and think it piety and view piety as going astray. They would be on a path to eternal damnation and think it salvation. They would turn away from God as their savior and worship His creation instead. Perhaps in their confusion they would label creation as God, assigning the Most High sons and daughters whom they would purport share His Divine attributes that belong solely to Him. Tamika knew she could never show enough gratitude to her Lord for guiding her away from that.

"Do you need to go to the store before you leave?"

Tamika considered Aminah's question for a moment. She shook her head. "I don't think so. If I need anything, I can buy it when I get to Milwaukee."

Aminah nodded. "Just let me know if you think of anything. Sulayman and I may be going to the mall to pick up some things before Saturday."

There was a brief pause. "What's happening Saturday?"

“Graduation.”

Oh. Tamika had forgotten Sulayman was a senior. She smiled. “Tell him I said congratulations.”

Aminah smiled and nodded. She paused as she remembered something. “I told him about tomorrow, and he said it’s no problem if we take you to the airport and that if you need anything else, just let me know.”

Tamika didn’t know how to respond. She was unaccustomed to such kindness coming from someone she barely knew. “I don’t wanna be a burden.”

Aminah laughed and shook her head. “Stop saying that.”

Tamika forced laughter. “But I’m sure he’ll get sick of running me all over the place.”

“He’s happy to do it.”

Tamika couldn’t help feeling flattered. She chuckled uncomfortably. “Why?”

“That’s just how he is. He takes his role serious as a Muslim man, you know, looking out for the sisters. Besides,” she said with a grin, “you’re giving him an opportunity to earn a lot of blessings.”

Tamika smiled, impressed that there were actually men who respected women that much. Before becoming Muslim, she was cautious of men who were extremely kind to women because they always expected something in return. In the world, nothing was free. A man’s generosity came with a high price, and a wise woman never accepted a man’s gifts—tangible or intangible—unless she was prepared to pay a hefty cost. That it was possible for a man to take care of women because he respected them and loved God was a concept difficult to comprehend, but it was one she couldn’t help admiring.

Aminah stood. “*InshaAllaah*⁶, I’m gonna take a nap for a few hours before Sulayman comes to pick me up.”

Tamika nodded and stood too. “I think I’ll just sleep until my body wakes me up.” She chuckled as she unpinned the cloth and pulled it from her head. “I’m exhausted.”

Aminah smiled and started for the room, where she removed her outer garment and *khimaar* before climbing into bed. Tamika followed suit, hanging her head cover and *abayah* on the footboard of her bed before lying down and going to sleep.

The sun’s brightness illuminated the room, telling Tamika that she had slept past noon. She sat up and stretched before getting out of bed. The apartment was quiet, and she assumed Aminah had already gone to the store with her brother. She glanced at the clock, which read 12:56. She didn’t have long before the next prayer, so she decided to shower, fix herself some breakfast, and pray before going anywhere.

In the kitchen, she poured herself some cereal after she showered and dressed for the day, wearing a cream-colored long sleeved blouse and a long, loose fitting jean skirt. She sat down at the table and began eating her cereal, mindlessly flipping through the school's newspaper that lay on the table. It was the latest issue and was filled with articles about summer vacation. Curiously, she turned to the editorial section, and before she had to look for it, the name "Sulayman Ali" stood out on the page.

"Getting Ready for Summer, A Little Advice," the article was titled. Tamika groaned and roll her eyes.

She reminded herself that she was Muslim now. She shouldn't dread his articles as much. But even as a Muslim, she doubted she would agree with his harsh tone. She skimmed the article, and a passage caught her eye.

"...and before doing it, ask yourself three questions. 1. Is it beneficial to me? 2. Is it beneficial to others? 3. Is it truly 'harmless fun'? If you can't answer yes to all three, think of something else to do to pass time..."

Tamika closed the paper, fearing she would be too cynical about whatever else he had to say. But she had to admit there was nothing wrong with what he suggested. In fact, it was good advice. Students often indulged in mindless activities that weren't beneficial to themselves or others and certainly couldn't count as harmless. If they heeded his advice, perhaps some lives would be saved. Even Dee had died because of a drunk driver. Perhaps if the student hadn't been drinking that day and had asked himself those three questions, her friend would still be alive...

Tamika stopped herself. *If* was a dangerous word. Nothing could erase what had happened. It was decreed long before the student or Dee ever walked the earth.

Tamika stood after finishing her food and carried her bowl to the sink, where she washed it and placed it in the dish drainer. She glanced at the clock on the stove. It was three minutes after 2:00. She went to the room to retrieve her head covering and prayed in the living room.

After praying, she pondered what she would do today, her last day on campus. She knew she would visit Makisha. She was both dreading and looking forward to the visit. But she wouldn't make Makisha's room her first stop. She considered visiting some of her professors to find out her grade on the final exam. She thought of Dr. Sanders. She would have to visit him. Although she had seen him only days before at the exam, she hadn't had the opportunity to talk to him personally. It was his term paper and presentation that prompted her study of and subsequent conversion to Islam. She knew he had a lot of questions about her journey, and he was the only non-Muslim who she felt would support her decision. She would visit him first, she decided. He would most likely be in his office. Most professors were on campus for several days after exams to grade papers and submit students' final grades.

Dr. Sanders's office door was propped open, but he didn't notice Tamika standing in the doorway. He was marking a paper, peering intently through his reading glasses at a test sheet that sat between two stacks of papers on either side of his desk. Tamika strolled in and glanced around his office. She studied the books on his shelves while she waited for permission to sit down.

"Oh." He laughed at himself and stood as he removed his glasses. He gestured for her to sit down. "Miss Douglass. What a pleasant surprise. Please have a seat."

She smiled, taking one of the seats opposite his desk. "Thank you."

"I was afraid I wouldn't get a chance to talk to you before the break." He leaned back in his seat and began rubbing his beard that was a shadow of gray and black on his face. He smiled at his favorite student. "Did you want to know your final grade?"

"Uh." An uncertain grin grew on her face. She chuckled self-consciously and shrugged. "Sure." Her response was tentative and revealed that she hadn't come to learn her grade.

He grinned, pretending not to notice her disinterest. "Well, you did quite well. As you know, your presentation was superb, and aside from some minor errors, your term paper was equally impressive. You passed."

"Passed?"

"With an A." His smile was wide and proud. He was always happy to see African-Americans doing well, especially at a school where they were the minority.

She nodded, unable to hide her pleasure. She had hoped she had done well in his class, but she didn't hope for more than a *B*.

There was a long pause, and an awkward silence grew in the room. Neither knew what else to say.

"So," Dr. Sanders drew in a deep breath, sparing Tamika the pressure of breaking the silence, "how does it feel?"

She knew he was referring to being a Muslim woman. "Good." She gave a thoughtful nod. "Different, but overall, I like it."

"What do you mean?" His eyes displayed the deep admiration he felt for her having the courage to take such a huge step.

"Like a big burden has been lifted from me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really? How so?"

She shrugged, struggling to find the right words. "I don't know." She smiled to make up for the long pause. "It's like I was walking around with my eyes shut and feeling this deep pain inside. Then I woke up one day with my eyes wide open and the pain all gone."

There was a reflective silence in the room.

He nodded. "So I guess this is it for you, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"You found your calling."

“Yeah,” she said hesitantly. “But I don’t think of it as my calling.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Because a calling depends on the individual. But to me, it’s like my,” she searched for the right word, “duty.”

There was a long pause. This time Tamika broke the silence.

“Remember you mentioned that you studied Islam once?”

He nodded and chuckled. “I studied almost every religion. I’m a religion professor.”

She smiled reluctantly, slightly offended by his response. “Yeah, but I thought you said that you, uh,” she didn’t want to sound too personal, “were thinking about joining it at one point.”

He nodded. He had shared that with her earlier in the semester. She had come to talk about the paper she was doing on Islam. “Yeah, but I considered joining a lot of religions. That’s what happens when you study so many.”

Tamika could tell he didn’t want to discuss Islam, at least not as it related to him. Perhaps he thought she was trying to convert him. She grew silent, unaccustomed to him putting up a guard between them. She had admired his frankness and honesty as a professor. It was as if he viewed her more as a comrade than a student. She looked up to him as she would a father. And Dr. Sanders had welcomed it, but now she felt like he was pushing her away.

“But yes,” he said, sensing he had offended her by his evasive response, “Islam is a religion I considered for quite some time.”

She nodded, afraid to respond. She knew his statement was more out of politeness than any desire to discuss the issue of religion. She glanced at her wristwatch to appear as if she had somewhere to go. She stood and forced a smile. “Well, I won’t take too much of your time. I know you have a lot of work to do. I just wanted to stop by and say hi before I left.”

“I appreciate it.”

She turned to go, avoiding eye contact. “No problem.”

“Tamika.”

She stopped in the doorway, and turned to him. “Yes?”

His face was warm, and Tamika could see a tinge of admiration in his eyes. His smile apologized for not being more open. “Congratulations.”

The words were soft and sincere, and Tamika knew he was referring more to her choice in religion than her *A* in his class. “Thanks.” She turned to go.

“And don’t worry too much about what people say.”

She paused at the door without turning to meet his gaze. The office fell silent momentarily.

“Have a good summer.”

“You too,” she called back then disappeared down the hall.

Dr. Sanders stared at the empty doorway for sometime after Tamika

had gone, his mind still on the student who reminded him so much of his own daughter who was now almost thirty years old. Felicia was reflective, kind, and studious, and she had struggled a lot with spiritual issues as a child. She had many questions for him and her mother about Jesus and the Trinity, and they were unable to answer them. They told her the only thing they could—to just believe.

Although he had let go of his belief in Jesus' divinity years ago, he never revealed this to Felicia, who had become a detached Christian, attending church only on Easter and Christmas or when someone died. Felicia rarely discussed what was on her mind in the religious realm. Their conversations usually centered around her job as an accountant in Chicago or the possibility of marrying her boyfriend of three years. Dr. Sanders often wanted to know how she was doing spiritually, but since religion had been a source of confusion for her, he decided against discussing it. The subject would cause too much discomfort—for them both. In some ways, he already knew where his daughter stood. He sensed that she was merely a reflection of himself. Like he, she believed in God, but it was difficult for her to formulate into words exactly what that meant. She likely believed that each religion had wisdom and truth, and no matter what label a religion had, doing good was the central message. It didn't matter what religion a person chose, he imagined she believed, the ultimate goal was the same.

This was the view he had held for sometime, but witnessing Tamika's search for answers and subsequent conversion to Islam rekindled unanswered questions he had pushed to the back of his mind. The likelihood of there being an absolute truth in religion always pricked at his conscience. The idea of there being no religion that was completely true or false didn't stand up to logic, at least not where belief in God was concerned. If one believed that God placed humans on the earth with guidance and purpose, then he necessarily had to believe that God taught only truth. And if so, the truth was one.

Islam had interested Dr. Sanders more than he had revealed. The religion had caused him internal turmoil and doubt about what he believed. It was Islam that solidified for him the fact that Jesus wasn't God. As he studied the religion, he was drawn to how it offered a logical explanation for the existence of so many different views of the Creator. Islam explained the varying views by simply stating that Adam was taught pure belief in and submission to God, which he taught to his descendents. As time passed, humans drifted away from the original teachings and introduced foreign concepts into the pure religion, often with good intent. Ultimately, people introduced new concepts of God himself. When paganism and sin began to define entire societies, God sent prophets and messengers to call people back to the truth. After each prophet, people strayed, whereupon God would send another prophet to clarify the truth. This was God's way

until He sent His last prophet and messenger with the Qur'an, the final revelation that humans would receive until the Last Day.

When Jesus was sent, it was for the same mission as the prophets that preceded him. After he was gone, people began to stray, as the people had before him. However, their straying culminated in a blasphemous irony—the prophet, who was sent for the purpose of calling people to worship God alone, became the object of worship himself. Meanwhile, the Day of Judgment drew nearer, and humans' time on the earth atrophied by the day. But there was to be one more prophet God would send. He would be the seal of the prophets, and his mission would be like those before him. Except for one fine point. Other prophets were sent to people of a specified time and place. But the prophet Muhammad would be God's messenger to the world until the end of time.

Why had Dr. Sanders never accepted the religion for himself? This was a question that befuddled even him. There was a time when he was tormented by his reluctance to submit, but he had long since abandoned pondering religious truths. He had resigned himself to being merely a specialist in religion. However, hearing Tamika's presentation on Islam awakened a part of him that he thought had died. It was as if he was hearing Islam for the first time.

He found himself captivated by the logic and simplicity of the religion, and the self-torment was ignited once again. Instinctively, he fought it. He would not go there. Yet, there was no resisting this religion, and it was impossible to attack it head-on. Even critics of Islam were forced to focus on extremists who practiced an Islam alien to the religion. Or they focused on particular details of its view on women and jihad, criticism which amounted more to personal opinions than any fallacy in the view itself. Other religions could be attacked at the base, Dr. Sanders couldn't help thinking as Tamika did her report. But no one, even the most scholarly of Islam's enemies, had been able to attack the foundation of the religion—the pure worship of God.

Dr. Sanders hadn't intended to offend Tamika with his evasiveness, but she was embarking upon rather sensitive ground. How could he offer simple answers to complex questions that he hadn't even addressed himself? He had lots of questions for Tamika, but he knew she wanted to talk about him. He sensed that it was perplexing to her how he could come across a religion as compelling as Islam and become content without accepting it formally. That was a question for which even he had no satisfactory response, except to say that, perhaps, Islam wasn't for him.

Outside Tamika reflected on the brief meeting with Dr. Sanders. He was indeed an interesting man. She could tell by his advice that he supported her decision. Then why the abruptness? The short answers? She pushed the questions out of her mind. She didn't want to think about that right then. She had a more pressing issue before her.

Tamika's heart pounded as she opened the door to Makisha's dormitory building. She had no idea what she would say, but she needed some closure. She couldn't go home without speaking to her best friend of two years. They couldn't go on avoiding each other. If they couldn't be friends, that was understandable. But the friendship should end with an explanation.

Tamika drew in a deep breath and exhaled before knocking on the door. She was almost certain Makisha would be in her room because most students were still packing and cleaning for the summer.

The door opened too suddenly for Tamika. A second after knocking, she stood face-to-face with Makisha, who wore a shocked expression on her face. She had expected Makisha to ask who it was.

"Oh, hi." Makisha forced a smile and opened the door to allow Tamika to enter.

"What's up?"

"Just packing." Makisha busied herself with placing books in a box that sat on top of her bed. "You?"

"I finished yesterday."

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning. You?"

"Sunday morning." Makisha's tone was without emotion, and her gaze was still on her box. "I wanted to stay to see Dante walk."

Dante was a good friend of Makisha's she had met their freshman year. Tamika often suspected the relationship was deeper than mere friendship, but since Makisha never mentioned it, Tamika hadn't either. "That's good."

"Why aren't you staying for graduation?"

"I guess I kind of forgot about it. Anyway, I don't know any seniors really well."

"Sulayman's graduating this year."

Makisha's tone was nonchalant, but her sarcasm was visceral. Tamika swallowed as anger boiled inside her. She glared at her friend, but Makisha wouldn't meet her gaze. Tamika stopped herself from uttering an evenly cruel remark, reminding herself that she was Muslim now.

She laughed, concealing her offense. "Sulayman?"

"Yeah, Aminah's brother."

"I don't know him that well."

"Really? I hear he hangs around the apartment a lot more now. You know, ever since you converted to his religion."

"I didn't convert to his religion." It was an unsuccessful attempt to conceal that she was upset.

Makisha forced laughter. "Well, you certainly look like you have."

Tamika rolled her eyes. "I converted to Islam, the religion of Jesus."

Makisha stiffened, and Tamika smelt victory.

There was a cold silence in the room.

“Is that what you came here for? To throw your so-called religion in my face?”

Tamika was silent, pleased that Makisha had tasted a bit of her own medicine.

“What is wrong with you, girl?” Makisha stared at her friend for a moment then shook her head. “How could you give up your soul for some stupid research paper?”

“I didn’t give up my soul.”

“Girl, you know as well as I do, there ain’t no way to heaven except through Christ.”

“I know that.”

Makisha was taken aback momentarily, and she met Tamika’s gaze as she gathered her eyebrows. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m following Christ.”

“Get the hell out of my room.”

“Is that a teaching of Christ?” Tamika knew it was a low blow, but Makisha had gone too far.

Makisha glared at Tamika. She started to say something but was unsure how to respond. Unexpectedly, tears glistened in her eyes, and Tamika immediately regretted what she said.

“Just get out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Is that a teaching of Islam?” A tear slid down her face as she stared at Tamika coldly.

Tamika didn’t respond. It was obvious that Makisha was groping for a counterattack.

“Why don’t you just go?” Makisha turned her back to Tamika.

“Not until you’re okay.”

Several minutes passed before Makisha pulled herself together. She wiped her eyes and sat on the edge of her bed with her back to Tamika. Feeling sorry for her friend, Tamika walked around the bed and sat next to Makisha. She decided against embracing her, fearing it was too much compassion to show at the moment.

Makisha stared at the wall in deep thought. “Maybe you should just go.”

“That’s not how I want to end the year.”

She sighed. “There’s nothing you can do about that now.”

Tamika considered apologizing but decided against it. She didn’t want to open herself up to attack, especially if Makisha mistook the apology as Tamika taking blame for what had happened.

“Well, I just stopped by to say goodbye and—.” Tamika paused as she gazed sympathetically at her friend, who wouldn’t look at her. “To say thank you.”

Makisha glanced over at Tamika with her forehead creased. “For what?”

“Being a friend.”

She forced laughter. “If that’s what you call it.”

Tamika looked at her watch, as she normally did when she saw no other way out of an awkward situation. “I have a lot to do before my flight tomorrow morning. But I didn’t wanna go without saying goodbye.”

Makisha turned to Tamika and smiled politely, but it was clear that she was still a bit shaken. “Thanks.”

Tamika considered giving her friend a hug but decided against it when Makisha didn’t stand when she headed for the door. “No problem.” She opened the door. “Tell Dante I said congratulations, and uh, have a nice summer.”

“You too.”

Tamika let the door close behind her. For a second, she paused next to the door, contemplating what had just happened. She was unsure how to take Makisha’s behavior, and she was even less sure how to interpret the meeting. If nothing else, it confirmed that their friendship had ended.

Tamika spent the rest of the day browsing through books at the school library and returned to her room shortly before sunset. As she unlocked the door and pushed it open, she felt someone pulling the door from the opposite side.

Sulayman nearly ran into Tamika before he realized she was trying to come in. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

She smiled self-consciously. “It’s no problem.”

He cast his eyes down and stepped back inside the apartment, still holding the door handle so she could enter. “*As-salaamu-alaikum.*”

“*Wa-‘alaiku-mus-salaam.*”

He shut the door behind him.

Aminah greeted her roommate from the floor in the living room, where she sat reading a book. Her hair was loosely bound in a pink ponytail holder, leaving the semblance of bangs around her face. “How was your day?”

Tamika shrugged, walking into the kitchen. “Pretty okay. You?”

“*Alhamdulillah.*”

“You find everything you need?” Tamika raised her voice so that her roommate could hear her from the kitchen. She removed a carton of juice from the refrigerator and poured herself a glass, using one of the few dishes that were left in the kitchen.

“Yes, *alhamdulillah.*” Aminah laughed. “Just pray for him.”

Tamika wrinkled her forehead as she carried her juice to the living room and took a sip. “Why?”

“He’s nervous.”

“About graduating?” She laughed as she sat down on the floor across from her roommate. Nervousness was a strange emotion to have at graduation.

Aminah laughed again and shook her head. “No, his speech.”

Tamika took another sip from her cup and set it down next to her. “Speech?”

“He’s speaking at graduation.”

She raised her eyebrows and nodded in approval. She lifted her cup and took another sip before setting it back down. “How’d he get to do that?”

“They asked him to.”

“Really? Is he the top student or something?”

Aminah shrugged. “I don’t know, but he did maintain a four-point-oh GPA since his freshman year. Maybe that’s why.”

Tamika’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

Aminah chuckled, suddenly self-conscious of Tamika’s amazement. “Yeah.”

“What’s his major?”

“He double majored in biology and chemistry.”

Tamika was speechless.

“He only did that because he’s going to medical school, *inshaAllaah*,” Aminah explained to downplay the significance of his major.

Tamika nodded dumbly, drinking the rest of her juice in a daze. Was it possible for someone to be that intelligent?

Aminah stood and stretched. “I’m gonna go ahead and get ready for prayer, *inshaAllaah*.”

Tamika nodded. “I’m in *wudoo*”.

After Aminah performed ablution, the roommates prayed *Maghrib*, the sunset prayer, and sat quietly reflecting after they had finished. A few minutes later, Aminah stood and prayed the two-unit voluntary prayer that was customary for the Prophet to pray after *Maghrib*. Tamika watched her and began to feel guilty before finally praying herself.

“Tamika?” Aminah said shortly after they finished the voluntary prayer. Both were still seated on the floor.

“Mm, hm.”

“Do you remember the brother who came over here with Sulayman last night?”

Inside Tamika groaned, remembering how he had humiliated her about her book. How could she forget him? “Uh, yeah. Omar?”

“Yeah.” Aminah wore an uncomfortable smile. “What do you think of him?”

Tamika stared at Aminah with a confused expression on her face. “What do I think of him?”

Aminah chuckled. “Yeah, you know.”

Tamika hoped her roommate wasn’t saying what she thought. “He seems nice. Why?”

Aminah chuckled again. “Well, he asked if you were available.”

Tamika laughed. "What! Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Sulayman told me today."

"He talked about me to Sulayman?" Tamika was mortified.

"Well, he wouldn't have talked to me."

They both laughed, and Tamika nodded. "I suppose that's true." There was a brief pause. "So, what did Sulayman say?"

"To Omar?"

"No. What Omar said."

"Oh." Aminah's expression revealed the humor she found in what she was about to reveal. "Just that he thought you looked kind of good and was wondering if you were already taken."

Tamika burst out laughing, and Aminah did too, unable to contain herself. Now that she repeated it, it did sound ridiculous.

"How long has he been Muslim?" The comment struck Tamika as too worldly to come from someone raised Muslim.

"A year."

She nodded. She wasn't surprised.

"So he doesn't seem like someone you'd be interested in marrying?"

"Marrying?" Tamika was unable to keep from laughing. "I don't even know who he is." A thought came to her suddenly, and her eyes widened in fear. "Did he ask to marry me?"

"No. But he did express interest in marrying you."

"He's out of his mind."

"What makes you say that?"

Tamika shook her head. It was hard to believe they were actually discussing this. "Marriage is serious. I'd never marry some strange man I met one time and don't love."

Aminah was silent as her expression grew intent.

"And anyway, he doesn't even know me. How's he know I'm not some maniac?"

"He didn't propose, Tamika. He just expressed interest."

"That's still insane."

"What's insane about it?"

"Come on, Aminah. Shouldn't he get to know me better before saying something like that?"

A half smile formed on Aminah's face. "So you think a person has to know you really well before he says he might want to marry you?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"No."

Tamika stared at her roommate in disbelief. "You'd marry a man you don't even know or love?"

"I didn't say that."

"But—."

"What I'm saying is, marriage is the only lawful relationship between

a man and woman, and—.”

“And?” Tamika rolled her eyes as she unfastened the pin under her chin and removed the head cover from her head before folding it neatly on her lap. She pulled the rubber band from her hair and ran her fingers through it, shaking it loose with her hand.

“Whenever a Muslim man is attracted to a woman,” Aminah said, “he thinks of it only in terms of marriage. It’s similar to how a man sees a good-looking woman and approaches her. But for most non-Muslim men, he approaches her because he hopes she’ll be his girlfriend one day. Or he may just want her for one night. So when he starts chatting with her at a club or in the mall, this is his frame of mind.” She paused then added, “And hers too.”

Tamika nodded reluctantly. “That’s true.”

“So they talk to see what they have in common. If they get along pretty well, they date until they’re officially a couple. If not, they go their separate ways. But the thought of her being a possible girlfriend or him a boyfriend isn’t thought of as insane, even though they probably didn’t even know each other’s names when he first approached her.”

Tamika wrinkled her nose. “So, in Islam marriage is like that?”

“Yes, in the sense that the initial attraction is thought of in terms of the goal. Of course, in this society, the goal is sin, while in Islam the goal is marriage.”

“So, basically, you’re saying that the word marriage is used loosely.”

Aminah laughed. “I wouldn’t put it like that. But, yes, I suppose you can say that because whenever marriage is brought up, it doesn’t mean that he definitely wants to marry her or vice versa. It’s just that they’re interested in seeing if the relationship can grow to that point.”

“I see.” Tamika toyed with the rubber band in her hand. “But how do they go about it? Do they date, go through a friend, what?”

Aminah twisted some strands of hair around a finger then held them in front of her face to look at them. “Well, that depends on if things are done according to Islam. If they are, the man first approaches the woman’s father. If the father approves of the brother, he may allow them to talk in his presence to see if they’re compatible. And if they like each other, they get married.”

“But what happens if a woman doesn’t live with her dad?”

“The closest male Muslim relative takes the responsibility.”

“Like her uncle or brother?”

“Yeah.”

Tamika bound the rubber band around three forefingers until she felt it pinching her skin. She scratched at the red rubber as she considered what Aminah said. It was a strange concept, but it made sense. She admired the way Muslim men took care of their women. She wondered if she would ever know how it felt to be taken care of.

Aminah smiled as she ran her palm over her hair then let her hand fall to her lap, where she turned a page of her book and glanced at it. “So should Sulayman just tell him to forget about it?”

Tamika chuckled. “I wouldn’t put it like that. But I think marriage, even if only a possibility, is a bit too much for me to digest right now. I don’t think I’ll get married for another ten years at least.”

Aminah laughed. “Ten years! You can’t be serious.”

“I need to finish my degree and establish my career first.”

“But then you’d be almost thirty!”

“Actually, I was thinking I’d probably wait until I’m thirty five.”

Aminah’s eyes widened. “Do you want children?”

“Maybe one or two.”

“Well, I suppose Omar should look elsewhere, huh?”

“If he’s willing to wait, he can.”

Aminah forced laughter. “I think we’ll just tell him you’re not interested.”

Tamika stood and chuckled, easing the band off her fingers with her thumb. “Anyway, I don’t think he’s my type.”

“Who is your type?” Aminah teased as she stood to join her friend, holding the book at her side.

Tamika pulled her hair back and bound it with the rubber band until it hung in a pony tail. She hadn’t really thought about it before. She was fifteen when she had her only boyfriend, and he definitely wasn’t the type of man she’d marry. “I don’t know.”

Aminah made her way to the kitchen, setting the book on a counter. “I guess you certainly have time to figure it out.”

Tamika laughed in agreement as she stood in the living room, still thinking about Omar. She wondered what he saw in her. Was he really attracted to her, or was he the type who wanted to talk to every woman he saw?

“Sulayman should get here between five and five thirty to go to the airport,” Aminah said to Tamika a few minutes later, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. “So, *inshaAllaah*, we’ll get you to the airport no later than six o’clock.”

“He doesn’t mind waking up that early?”

“He has to get up for prayer anyway.”

“You know, I can take a taxi if—.”

“Forget it. Sulayman’ll never forgive me if I let you take a taxi, especially for that distance.”

“Why?”

Aminah grinned. “Well, let’s just say, the best scenario is that you avoid riding alone in a car with a strange man, especially if he isn’t Muslim.”

“Is he overprotective or something?”

“No, just protective. Actually, I’m not that comfortable with the idea myself, especially in this crazy country.”

Tamika nodded. America definitely wasn't the safest place in the world for women, but she was reluctant to hold fast to a rule that would restrict her ability to go where she pleased.

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Her novels have touched the lives of readers across the world, inspiring non-Muslims to accept Islam, Muslims to renew their faith, and avid readers to enjoy compelling, heart-moving tales.



