

*"The novel belongs to... a genre worthy of scholarly study."*

— Professor K. Bryant, *Howard University, Review of If I Should Speak*

A photograph of a man and a woman walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a lush green forest. The woman is wearing a white hijab and a light-colored dress, and the man is wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans. They are walking hand-in-hand. The title 'Footsteps' is overlaid in a large, stylized, dark red font with a white outline.

# Footsteps

A NOVEL

UMM  
ZAKIYYAH



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*A Novel*

Umm Zakiyyah



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# **Footsteps**

A Novel

By Umm Zakiyyah

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All characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real persons or incidents is coincidental.



## **Dedication**

*For the wives.*

*May you enter Paradise by any door you choose.*



## Prologue

There are years, I've been told, that one simply skips when reflecting on memories of a long marriage together. For me, 1997 was one of those years. Although my preparations for the second weekend in May had preoccupied me, as could be expected, from life itself. Sulayman had just completed his second year of medical school, and although the weekend celebration had nothing to do with this accomplishment, I was proud of my son. It wasn't that I wasn't proud of his wife. How couldn't I be? She would be the first in her family to graduate from college. That was no small achievement. The party was really for her, for them. June eighth would mark their first anniversary, and what better way to commemorate both milestones than to have two celebrations in one?

Sulayman kept reminding me that they weren't celebrating their anniversary. They were simply having the *walimah* they never had. And throwing in an accolade for Tamika during the wedding party was just a bonus, added more to increase the chances of her family traveling to Atlanta for the event than to celebrate the achievement itself. Either way, the weekend was a momentous one, and if it hadn't been for Kate's emotional, not to mention financial, support, I don't know how I would have made it through the eight months it took to prepare. I had no time to focus on myself, let alone my husband and daughter.

My sister and I had our hands full, and that we were not in the same city didn't help any, but I can't complain. If nothing else, the *walimah* preparations brought us closer in a way we hadn't been since I accepted Islam. In retrospect, I do recall Ismael and Aminah spending a lot of time together during those months, or if not together, at least apart from me, so I should have been prepared. But I was too distracted. Besides, how do you prepare for your life to fall apart?

In all honesty, even if I hadn't been distracted, I would've seen nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to warn me that life as I knew it, however imperfect it already was, was on weakening, aching legs, and that I had little power to fortify it. For I had something more precious to tend to.

# Part

## I



*“I looked at all friends and did not find a better friend than safeguarding the tongue. I thought of all garments, but did not find a better garment than piety. I thought of all types of wealth, but did not find better wealth than contentment in little. I thought of all types of sustenance, but did not find a better sustenance than patience.”*

**—Umar Ibn Al-Khattab**



*“Go with this life behind you, and go with the next life in front of you. Each life has its children, so be from the children of the Hereafter and be not from the children of this world. Today are deeds without reckoning and tomorrow is reckoning without deeds.”*

**—Ali bin Abi Talib**





# One

Sarah pulled another towel from the hamper and folded it, turning her back to her husband until she faced the window that overlooked their backyard. The sky was a dusty blue and the sun a dying glow that even in its dimness illuminated the expanse of grass in need of mowing. Frustrated that Ismael hadn't done it, she averted her gaze and focused her attention on the growing piles of neatly folded towels stacked on the futon before her. Had it been any other time, someone else would have been responsible for the yard. But just six weeks before, in the middle of the most hectic phase of her and Kate's planning for the *walimah*, her husband had suggested they save money by caring for the yard themselves. Of course, Ismael promised he'd be responsible, just as he'd promised his help during the wedding party planning.

"I really don't feel like talking about this right now," Sarah said.

"I don't either, sweetheart, but I think we should tell the family *something*."

"Then tell them no. She's not ready for marriage." She heard her husband laugh from where he sat behind her on the family room floor matching socks from a pile of laundry between them. This only irritated Sarah more, but she refused to give him the pleasure. He was trying to irritate her. He often said she was cute when she was upset and found it funny when he got to her.

"She's twenty years old, Sarah," Ismael said. "She's ready for marriage."

"Age doesn't equal readiness."

He sighed, and Sarah knew he'd paused his folding and was staring at her back. "You have to let go sometime."

"This isn't about me." She shook out a towel and quickly folded it before picking up another.

"This certainly isn't about Aminah. She was ready years ago."

She turned slightly and narrowed her eyes as she met his gaze. "Just because she *wanted* to marry someone at sixteen doesn't make her ready. She was a baby."

"Then what does?" He shook the black sock pair that he held in his hand and laid it next to the others, allowing him to avoid his wife's gaze momentarily.

"I'm her mother. That should be good enough."

"If this were Abdur-Rahman proposing—"



“This isn’t Abdur-Rahman, and our answer is no.” She abruptly pulled a T-shirt from the laundry basket and resumed folding with her back to her husband, but her mind was not on her chores.

“Our?”

“Yes, *our*.”

“Well, they’re having a meeting next Saturday.”

Halting her folding, Sarah slowly turned around and glared at Ismael. “This is not the time for a meeting. My sister will be here first thing in the morning, and Tamika’s family should be here tomorrow night.”

“That’s why I scheduled it for next weekend.”

“Where?” She could hear the exhaustion in her voice as if groping for reprieve, knowing she’d find none.

“Here.”

“Here?” She mentally scolded herself for raising her voice.

“Where else would we have it?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Sarah sat on the edge of the futon. She began rummaging through the socks and undergarments that remained in the laundry basket, but her mind was far from focusing on arranging them according to color. She really didn’t have the energy to argue with her husband. These past eight months had been exhausting, and she was looking forward to it all being over. She never imagined that Sulayman and Tamika’s wedding party would take so much from her.

She knew it wasn’t her husband’s fault that the planning had become more than she could bear. But that didn’t change the fact that it was inconsiderate of him to agree to meet with the family of the young man interested in marrying Aminah, and schedule it just one week after the *walimah*. Couldn’t he have waited a month? At least then she would have had time to catch her breath and remind herself that she had had a life before the weekend of May tenth.

“You’re doing too much,” Ismael said.

Sarah pulled a green undershirt from the basket and let it fall on the floor before she found the matching short pants and dropped it on the shirt to create a pile.

“I’m glad you noticed.”

“Look, Sarah, I’m sorry if this is bad timing, but—”

“It’s not just bad timing, Ismael, it’s selfish. You didn’t even ask me if next weekend was good.”

“If it was up to me, I’d cancel it completely.”

“Then cancel it.”

“I can’t. Aminah would be heartbroken.”

Sarah started to laugh, but it came out as a cough, making her sarcasm appear crueler than she intended. “Heartbroken? You make it sound like she’s losing the love of her life. She doesn’t even know this brother.”

“She knows of him.”

“Like that means anything.”

“Sarah, that means more than we’ll ever understand. It’s all she can go on.”

Sarah sighed and rubbed her forehead with her hand. She knew what her husband meant, but she didn’t want to think about her own life right then. They were talking about their daughter. They couldn’t be blamed for how they themselves had come to marry. They weren’t Muslim when they met. How were they supposed to know that setting limits was more valuable than testing, or crossing them? Besides, they didn’t have the luxury of parental support had they even known, or cared, that there was no way to really get to know someone before marriage. Marriage was marriage. And in the cruel irony of life, marriage was its own teacher. There was really little one could do to prepare for the union. Except to have faith. And they hadn’t even had that.

“Where’d you say this family’s from? India?”

“Pakistan.”

Sarah nodded, trying to appear as if she were unperturbed. “We know nothing about that country.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Of course we have to. If we don’t, we might as well just count down till her divorce.”

Ismael sighed. “I know there will be cultural differences, sweetheart. I thought about all that.”

“Cultural differences? You say that as if we’re talking about an international buffet. This isn’t an exotic dinner, Ismael. This is our life, our daughter’s life. Marriage is too serious to open our arms to any Joe who proposes.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“Maybe I am. And maybe you should be overreacting too. Do you really think she can handle someone who expects her to be in the house all day, serving him hand and foot?”

Ismael laughed. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit, uh,” he searched for a word, “stereotypical?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know just as well as I do that that’s what the women from those countries are expected to do.”

“Aminah’s not from *those countries*. She’s American.”

“That’s exactly my point.” Sarah shook her head. “Those marriages don’t work, Ismael. How many cross-cultural marriages do you know of that even lasted to their tenth anniversary?”

Ismael was silent as he smoothed the wrinkles from a pair of socks he was holding, allowing his gaze to fall there momentarily. “Ours.”

Sarah opened her mouth to respond but found no words. She reached into the basket but was able to only half-heartedly toss clothes

to and fro, the motion slowed as his words permeated her. Inadvertently, her gaze fell, and she studied the whiteness of her hand against the dark fabrics and the pale peach of her skin against the white. Loosened strands of blond hair fell in front of her face, and she tucked them behind her ear, letting her finger trace the soft of her ear with the motion, buying time, time she didn't know she needed.

She couldn't look at him. She didn't have to. Even if she closed her eyes, she could see his skin, a light brown the color of milk with a touch of coffee, and his emerald eyes that humbled themselves to reflect the color of his clothes or mood, which ever was lighter.

She often forgot. Then again, how could she be expected to remember? Twenty-six years of marriage did that to a person. Through their marriage, two lives had become one, and no longer was Sarah "White" and Ismael "Black," biracial. They were human. Two humans who loved each other. In their home, that was all that mattered, was all that could matter. With the demands of life, they weren't capable of much else. Only when they left home were they reminded that others perceived them differently. And how awkward it was to be perceived as odd when they were so much alike, so attached, and in need of one another. But even that, the stares and racist judgments, had stopped once Sarah wore Islamic garb. And then, she and her husband were as they saw themselves at home, Muslims, though strangers, outcasts, in their own world. And then the stares changed to disgust.

"With us, it was different." Even as she said it, she knew it was a weak point. But she needed to say something, to protest somehow.

"You know that's not true."

"It is," she said, beginning to convince herself. "We're both American. This boy is from another continent. There, you're not only battling different races. You're battling ways of life."

"We met in the 1960's, Sarah. In the South. If anyone is battling ways of life, it's us."

"Still, we came from the same country."

"But different worlds."

Sarah looked at the clock that hung on the wall. She didn't want to have this conversation. "You should go pray."

Instinctively, Ismael glanced at the clock too. He nodded and stood, running his hands over his slacks to remove the wrinkles.

"Come with me."

Sarah creased her forehead and stared at him. "Come with you?"

"Yeah. We can pray together in the *masjid* then go out to eat."

"I have too much to do."

"Tamika's family won't be here till late tomorrow night, at the earliest, since they're driving. And Kate's flight isn't coming in tonight. We have time."

"You have time. I don't." She gestured her hands to the laundry that was now taking up the futon, couch, and most of the floor.

"I miss you."

Sarah heard her husband's voice in all its gentleness and knew he was apologizing. But she wasn't in the mood for romantic make-ups. It would have been better if he hadn't given her reason to be upset, through making the offensive comment or agreeing to the meeting about Aminah. He knew this was a major weekend for them. Even her mother and brother were planning to come. And she hadn't seen her mother since she walked out during Sulayman's graduation lunch last year. And Justin, she hadn't seen him since she surprised him with a visit seven years before. And she would be meeting Tamika's family for the first time. This had been the most dreaded and anticipated event for her. The last thing she needed was a candlelight dinner. She just needed a break, and next weekend would have been her first opportunity for it.

"If you miss me, why did you give up our time together for some silly meeting? We could've spent time together next weekend."

"We still can."

She shook her head as she stood, turning to face the futon again to study her stacks of towels. She glanced at the basket and spotted a towel she hadn't seen. "Not anymore. I can't think straight when I know we're having guests, especially ones I didn't know we invited."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry." She heard his voice growing closer. Anticipating an embrace, she retrieved the towel from the hamper to discourage him.

"I just didn't want to burden you with anything else."

She raised her eyebrows and suppressed the frustration she felt rebuilding in her chest. She stiffened as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. "If you didn't want to burden me, you wouldn't agree to something like this without telling me."

"I know." Ismael's voice was soft and close as he touched his cheek against hers. "You had so much on your mind, I didn't think you'd want to arrange a time for them to meet."

In spite of herself, Sarah relaxed her shoulders and softened under his embrace. "But I deserve to know if my daughter's being given away in marriage."

She felt her husband's laughter against her back before it reached her ears. "No one's giving Aminah away. It's just a meeting, with Aminah, the brother, and myself."

"I thought you said the family was coming."

"No," he said, brushing her cheek with a kiss. "I said we have to tell the family something. They won't be at the meeting."

Sarah's gaze fell to the towel she still held in her hands. She attempted to fold it, but she couldn't move beneath her husband's arms.

She let the towel dangle from her hands as she realized that the meeting would not require elaborate preparations.

“I’ll starve him,” Ismael joked. “You won’t have to prepare any food. It’s a good start, see how he reacts under pressure.”

Sarah laughed in spite of herself. Her husband released her, and she turned to face him, still holding the towel that she now proceeded to fold.

“You need a break,” he said, gently lifting her chin to meet his gaze.

She nodded, looking at him for only a moment. “Yes, I do. But not tonight.”

“Especially tonight.”

“I have too much to do.”

“You’ve done more than enough already.”

She shook her head, but under her husband’s pleading gaze, a smile tugged at a corner of her mouth. “If only that were true.”

“You won’t enjoy any of it if you don’t relax.”

“Look at this place. How can I dine out with my house in shambles?”

“Sarah, the house is spotless. I’m sure the neighbors can smell the Pinesol and Pledge right now, if they can’t taste it in their food.”

She grinned and turned slightly to place the towel on a pile.

“All we have to do is put these clothes away,” her husband said.

“You say that like we’re not buried in them.”

“It’s time for *Maghrib*. Let’s pray, eat, and we’ll be back in time to finish this before eleven, *inshaAllaah*.”

“I wanted to vacuum the—”

“You vacuumed this morning.”

“But I should vacuum again.”

“Then do it in the morning.”

“I’ll be too tired then.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

She started to laugh. “You always say that. You know you don’t have time. You have to work in the morning.”

“Sarah,” Ismael said, gazing at her until their eyes met, “I’ll do it, *inshaAllaah*. In fact, I’ll put the rest of the clothes away. And I’ll stay up all night if I need to.”

Sarah wanted to tell him no, but she didn’t have the strength. She was too tired, and stressed.

“Go upstairs, shower, and pick out your nicest dress.”

“*Jilbaab*, you mean,” she said with a grin.

“No,” he said, taking her hands into his, “that would go over the nice dress.”

He released her hands, and she couldn’t keep from smiling as she felt him grinning and following her with his eyes as she went upstairs.



Tamika ran a hand over the packaging tape to smooth it against the roughness of the used cardboard box that sat on the desk next to her bed. She felt the tape gather beneath her palm in stubborn resistance to her efforts to prevent air pockets. She placed her hands on her hips and examined the top flaps of the box. Shrugging, she decided the package could survive unopened the forty minutes it would take Sulayman to drive from Streamsdale to Atlanta tomorrow night.

She glanced around the dorm room that appeared desolate now that she had finished packing her clothes and books. The few frames that she had brought herself to hang on the wall were now stacked on top of the suitcase she was using to put away the clothes she kept in the room. She knelt slightly as she reached for the top frame. She ran a finger along the crevices of the carved wood design as she read the quote that had been her reminder during her last year at Streamsdale. *I have never regretted anything as much as my regret over a day on which the sun sets and my life span decreases while my good deeds have not increased.*

She often stared at it wondering what a righteous man like Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud could have been thinking when he said it. He had been a companion of the last prophet and messenger of Allah, an honor in itself. He had been praised by Prophet Muhammad for his piety and striving for the Hereafter. What regrets could he possibly have had as the sun declined in the sky?

Tamika returned the frame to its place and glanced toward the window that seemed to have been an afterthought in interior design. In the small confines of the room, it seemed larger than the desk and bed, and placed there more for necessity than desire. It overlooked the foot of her bed like an intent watchman. Permanent, insistent, and still. She could access what was beyond only by perching herself in a huddle on the end of her bed and peering out. The only floor space below it was made too narrow by the protruding flat belly of the peeling wood dresser secured to the wall. The bed itself was immobile, not because it was stationary, but because there was really nowhere to move it. Its side was already pressed against the left wall, covering from view the only outlet in the room. Moved to the right, it would impede access to the dresser drawers and cabinets under the mirror and sink. The desk sat near its head and prevented the door from opening wide.

When she first saw the room, she wondered why the headboard was opposite the window and not under it. After her first night there, she understood the necessity of the position. Lying in bed, one was able to have the only comfortable view of outside, and it fostered the illusion of

capaciousness that the cramped room could not offer. Ever since her sophomore year, Tamika had dreamed of having a single. She had envied her then best friend Makisha for having the luxury of no roommate, and Tamika too wanted to relish in the solace of her own space. Now that she had it, she felt suffocated in her solitude and had to fight the heaviness she felt in her heart each Sunday night when Sulayman drove her back to Streamsdale and walked her down the corridor to her room. Like one imprisoned, Tamika felt her husband was walking her to her cell, and she could only count the days until her sentence would be over. Then she could return home and once again enjoy the comfort of the home they shared.

Of course, she didn't want to live in the dorm now that she was married. But she and Sulayman agreed it was best for her to at least have a room to go to between classes or at night if he was unable to pick her up until late. Gradually, the room became less an escape than a solitary confinement when Sulayman's late nights at school became later and later, often approaching or reaching beyond midnight. It was too painful for him, he said, to pick her up from school and have to turn his attention to studies instead of her, so he completed all his work before making the drive. It was Tamika who suggested she come home only on weekends. She saw the physical and emotional strain it was for him to drive the distance late at night only to turn back around just after dawn to return her to school and then drive the forty minutes back to Atlanta to make it on time to his first class.

It was emotionally draining for Tamika too. It was torturous for her to wake up next to her husband only to be greeted with the reminder that, because of the drive, she could not linger in bed. There were times that she and Sulayman resisted, shutting their eyes and minds to the glowing red digits that stared at them impatiently, urging them to start the drive. Instead they held each other and relished the sweetness of the comfort they drew from each other's presence. And for a brief moment, the world disappeared and they had the one thing they cherished most—each other. But the sound of a phone, the falling of a book, or even an escaped sneeze, the slightest disruption reminded them of Sulayman's eight o'clock class and Tamika's distant campus that demanded she return to complete her final year.

Tamika walked over to the window and stood wedged between the dresser and bed to study the sky. Outside was a darkening blue and traces of the dying orange sun setting on the opposite side of the building. She remained there a moment more, taking in the way the trees created a silhouette, and knowing that somewhere far beyond was home.

A furtive grin creased one side of her mouth as she walked over to the sink. Already she felt ecstatic as she imagined how her life would be after this weekend. She and Sulayman could finally live together like a real

married couple, and they had an entire three months off from school before Sulayman had to return to medical school for the fall of his third year. The grin spread until she stifled laughter as she imagined the freedom she would enjoy after graduation. The day after tomorrow she would don the notorious cap and gown and walk across the stage holding a vinyl covered piece of paper enclosing her Bachelor of Arts in Religion, which had cost her four years of life and dues it would take a lifetime to account for. Undoubtedly, there were moments she rather not remember, but she held on to them because without them she would overlook the most harrowing and rewarding journey of her life.

Tamika turned the bulky plastic knobs until the faucet released a rush of water that beat against the metal sink with the persistence of one throbbing for release. The sudden noise was both awkward and reassuring in the stillness of the room and Tamika held both palms under the stream until the cool water calmed to tepidity. She adjusted the knobs until the water was a gentle stream and gave the appearance of a soft icicle. She filled her left hand with water and poured it over the right before rubbing the moisture over the front and back of her hand. She slipped the left hand fingers between the crevices of the right to complete this first step of ablution in preparation for *Maghrib*. She cupped her right hand to fill it and do for the left what it had done for the right.

There were moments like this when she loved *wudhoo'*. When she first became Muslim, it had been a task learning the steps from Sulayman's sister Aminah, who had been her roommate at the time. Although the ritual of cleansing oneself for prayer was intriguing, it had been confusing to Tamika, who as a Christian had prayed only before meals, when she wanted something badly enough, or on Sunday during church. And she certainly hadn't prefaced the recited words with any ritual cleansing. But even as a new Muslim it was refreshing to feel the water being generously massaged on her hands, face, and arms. Though including her feet in the ritual felt a bit awkward at first, especially when she performed ablution at a sink, it too became refreshing over time.

Prayer was her escape then, and at moments when she was not distracted by the minute hand on her watch, it remained her escape even now, two years after she converted to Islam. Sister Sarah, her mother-in-law, often joked that Tamika and Sulayman would be celebrating their first anniversary on Saturday night, the evening of Tamika's graduation. Sulayman said it was the *walimah* they hadn't had after their small, private wedding ceremony held in his home last June. And Tamika's family imagined they were coming to a double celebration, of Tamika's marriage and her being the first in their family to graduate from college. But to Tamika it was none of these, though their significance added to the magnitude of the momentous occasion.



For Tamika, it was a celebration of her Islam. And an announcement and invitation for her family to submit to the religion their Creator had enjoined on humans since Adam and his wife grazed the earth. Of course, there would be no explicit invitation or teaching at the event, but Tamika's prayer was that Allah would open their hearts to His religion on Saturday even if only through witnessing the beauty of Muslims gathered in one place. And witnessing Tamika among them.

With the moistened palm of her hand, Tamika completed her *wud-hoo'* by wiping over the tops of the thin socks she often wore in her dorm room to keep from soiling her feet against the bare tiled floor. Besides, the air conditioning in the dormitory was set at a lower temperature than usual, and her feet would have been freezing in the carpet-less room if she hadn't covered them. Given that the sink was higher than most sinks, most likely because of the cabinet space beneath them, she was grateful that she didn't have to remove her socks for *wudhoo'*, having put them on after showering and performing ablution that morning.

She turned off the water and immediately the room grew quiet. Tamika sighed as she slid open a closet door and removed the two-piece white prayer garment Sulayman had bought for her at the *masjid* near his parents' home. Sliding the closet door closed, Tamika was able to briefly distract herself from her thoughts with the noise. She felt the heaviness growing inside, and her efforts to fight it made her chest knot in longing for her husband. She fought the urge to call him just to hear his voice right then. She needed to pray, and there was no way she could hang up the phone and pray *Maghrib* before its time expired after hearing him on the other line. Even as she adjusted the waist-length *khi-maar* on her head and pulled the elastic-band skirt over her jeans, she knew that even her patience to wait until after prayer was a mental game she was playing with herself. She shouldn't call him even after she prayed. She had finished her last exam this morning, but Sulayman's last exam wasn't until tomorrow afternoon. And he needed the time to study. She had promised herself, though not him, to wait for him to call, as he always did, when he was done. Calling her was always the first thing he did when he closed his books for the night. On Fridays, he wouldn't waste time with a phone call. He would jump into his car and drive to Streamsdales University to pick up his wife, who was always waiting with orchestrated patience for his knock at the door. She would not disturb him tonight. Besides, tomorrow evening would be her last Friday spent on campus, and Sulayman would pick her up for the final time. She couldn't wait. It felt like years until tomorrow.

After prayer Tamika sat in acceptance of her predicament. It wasn't bad really. This would be the last night she would sleep alone. But how cold and desolate the bed would feel compared to the one she shared with Sulayman. Tamika began to recite the Qur'an that was customary

for the Prophet to recite after prayer. She raised her voice to drown out her thoughts and mollify the yearning she felt for her husband. The miraculous words soothed her ears and calmed her heart, ensuring her that Allah would give her more than she imagined if she could just be patient through tonight.

Reciting God's words inspired relief and reflection. She was Muslim, a believer. And the affair of the believer was always good, she reminded herself. In times of ease, she was grateful. In times of hardship, she was patient. Immediately, she felt ashamed. She should be grateful. This trial was miniscule compared to what others faced around the world. And what was she upset about anyway? It was a blessing in itself that she had a husband, and not just any husband. Sulayman. That should be enough. But how could she blame herself for wanting to be near him right then? Oh God, she missed him so much. Her relief from the confines of this year was almost palpable right then as she thought of tomorrow night.

Continuing to recite from the Qur'an, she shut her eyes momentarily as she recalled the promises she had made to herself, and Allah, this year. If she could just get through this year of studying and writing about religions that she couldn't hope to comprehend, she would give the rest of her time to her own. Hugging her knees, she opened her eyes and stared at the aged wood of the door. It all felt so pointless, the weekly chapter readings, mid-term and term papers, exams, discussions, and philosophical debates during class. If it wasn't so time-consuming and overbearing, she would have laughed at the ridiculousness of it.

Her professors reigned in the classroom with an arrogant confidence that both irritated and depressed her. She imagined the sight of her Islamic dress was both repulsive and intimidating to them. The *khimaar* on her head that revealed only her face. The loose *abiya*, which she imagined appeared to them as it did to Tamika herself when she had first seen it on Aminah, as an oversized dress in need of tailoring. To them she wore the costume of the oppressed from distant lands and was the poster child of backwardness in a forward thinking world. To her, their faces bore the costume of the ignorant, and they were poster children for gross close-mindedness in an open-minded, ever changing world. Had she been Sulayman or Aminah, she would have vocalized her observation during class, but she spoke little and cursed herself for saying too much. She was best at questions because they were short, and protected her from the awkward awareness she felt at the sound of her voice. And that's how she won small battles throughout the year, although she wasn't naïve enough to imagine she had won them all.

She had imagined her last year of school would be the easiest, if for no other reason than it was her last. But the closure of it all did not ease the stress school provoked but stoked it. That she had to push through, *had* to make it, made it all the more suffocating, and she longed for

reprieve. It would be senseless to stop running when she was inches from the finish line, and yet that made it all the more difficult to reach it.

The professors in all their towering glory and pedagogic pride depressed her as they threw out historical facts and “groundbreaking” research statistics as if this knowledge had earned them the solitary key to the treasures of the earth. The teachers depressed her because she knew them too well, perhaps more than they knew themselves. And she felt ashamed, guilty because she should have said something, anything to let them know that they did in fact hold that solitary key, buried somewhere deep in their souls. If only they could uncover it.

Tamika bit her lower lip as she recalled moments she should have spoken but did not. She held onto the moments when she did speak, when she had felt in the lecture hall itself the sweltering revelation of the profound. At such moments, even the haughty professor was silenced, even humbled, if only for a moment. But in the roaring beast of pride he, or she, would reclaim the class with a vengeance so inappropriate that Tamika would know then, for sure, she had won.

Still, it all felt like a waste. On spare moments, or at least moments she made spare, she hungrily read the pages of an Islamic book from home, highlighting inspirational passages or poignant explanations she could not have thought of on her own. Often she found that she had highlighted an entire page. But most days her hunger for time to herself, her life, and soul were met with stacks of texts to read and lengthy papers to write. She would pause from her reading or writing in an effort to gather her thoughts only to be met with the stinging quote of Abdullah Ibn Mas’ud that hung as a weighty reminder on her wall. It was at such moments that she wondered what good deeds she had gained at the setting of the sun. And what was she gaining with such a sacrifice of moments from her life span that would only continue to decrease? It had never been her dream to go to college. Singing had been her love. Although she had chosen Islam over it, nothing had erased her disdain for the scripted pantomime required for a university degree. As a student, Tamika spoke, but used no words. At least not ones others could hear. She moved about, but only on a stage with other actors who filled a similar role. And when the curtain closed, and reopened to real life, what would the students do? Wait for the applause of an audience that would then be a lone reflection of one’s self?

A knock at the door brought Tamika to her feet and since she was already covered in the prayer garment, she didn’t bother to speak through the wood. Exhausted from knowledge of what was behind her, and dread of what was before her until her release from the room tomorrow night, she sighed and opened the door. In that brief moment she prepared the rehearsed smile she would wear to greet whatever classmate or friend was coming to visit or say goodbye.

Tamika brought a hand to her mouth in surprise in the moment it took her to realize who it was. A smile spread so broadly on her face that she couldn't have hidden the sincere pleasure and child-like joy she felt upon seeing her husband opposite her when he was supposed to be home. Immediately, she threw her arms around him, forgetting, and unable to care, that they were in public view. The fullness of his embrace told her he hadn't missed her any less. As she nestled against him, she inhaled the sweet scented musk that had come to define him. He was actually here. It felt like years since they had been this close.

"*As-salaamu'alaikum.*" Tamika could feel the guttural vibrations of his greeting from where she held her face against him and savored the sound of his deep voice.

"*Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam,*" she said more to the collar of his shirt than to him.

They released each other to allow him to enter, and he knelt to retrieve two full plastic grocery bags that he apparently had set on the floor before knocking. Raising her eyebrows, she grinned.

"What's this?"

"A surprise."

She could not contain herself after she closed the door and locked it. She immediately knelt next to the bags and peered in, smiling broadly. "Dinner."

He nodded. "But we won't eat it here."

Creasing her forehead, she looked at him.

"You're coming home early. I miss you."

Shy from the flattery, she returned her gaze to the bag. "But it'll be cold."

He shrugged. "I thought of that. But I miss the Chinese restaurant down the street from here, so I didn't want to miss the chance to eat from it one last time."

Tamika felt him staring at her, and she met his gaze with a grin. "What?"

"You're beautiful, *barakAllaahufeeek.*"

She shook her head as she stood. "You got me beat in that camp."

He laughed. "I wish."

She pulled the *khimaar* from her head and stepped out of the skirt before sliding the closet door open and removing an *abiya* and *khimaar* to wear home. "What about my things?"

"I'll load them while you get dressed." He surveyed the room. "Is this everything?"

She nodded. "I didn't bring much."

"Good." He lifted a box and started for the door, still grinning at his wife. Tamika unlocked it and opened it for him, a smirk on her face as she relished the attention.



Aminah rested her hand on the mouse as she brought the miniature arrow on the monitor to the send button and clicked. She didn't want to end the e-mail right then, but she heard her mother coming up the stairs and knew she would be coming into the guest room to tell her that they were going out. Aminah had not heard everything, but she heard enough to know that her parents had been arguing. She felt bad that she was the cause of the tension, but she found it difficult to avoid blaming her mother for being so difficult. What was so wrong with Aminah marrying Zaid? What was she supposed to do? Live with her parents for the rest of her life? It frustrated Aminah even more that her mother wouldn't give up her obsession with Aminah marrying Abdur-Rahman, or Teddy, as his mother called him.

Abdur-Rahman and his father had been Muslim for nearly three years now and his mother for a little over a year. Sarah had met the mother in a furniture store last year while she was shopping for Sulayman's apartment. Aminah still remembered the day her mother had come home, grinning and bursting with pride.

"You won't believe who I met today," she had told Aminah, who had graduated from Streamsdales just days before. Aminah was putting her clothes away after moving back home from the dorm room she had shared with Tamika. Sarah hadn't waited for a response. "Faith Anderson."

Aminah had stared blankly at her mother, pausing from where she held a drawer open, poised to place a folded T-shirt there. "Who?"

"We were in undergrad together. Same sorority."

"Oh." Aminah smiled, happy because her mother was, and laid the T-shirt on top of the others, gently pressing it to make room for others.

"And she's Muslim."

Aminah's eyes widened as she met her mother's. Now that was something. "No."

"Yes." Sarah began pulling clothes from Aminah's luggage and putting them away. "She lives in Dunwoody with her husband and son." She paused and grinned at Aminah. "Who are Muslim too?"

"What?" Aminah couldn't believe it.

"Her husband is a writer and travels a lot. Turns out he took a trip to Morocco three years ago as a part of some research he was doing for a book and took his son with him."

"That's where they became Muslim?"

Sarah shook her head. "Her husband became Muslim in Syria a year later. Then came home to find out his son had accepted Islam on his own while he was gone."

“What about Faith?”

She sighed and sat down on Aminah’s bed, smiling as she held a dress she had placed on a hanger. “She resisted at first. She’s a psychologist specializing in counseling abused women.”

Aminah frowned as she placed another shirt in the drawer, a bit offended that Islam always seemed to be misconstrued as a religion that mistreated women.

“And a self-proclaimed feminist. Once she read enough to learn what Islam was really about, she was fine.”

It would be a month later that Aminah would meet Faith and see Abdur-Rahman for the first time. They had been invited to dinner, and Sarah was a bit apprehensive because she was unsure if they would be expected to sit together and chat. Aminah’s mother also was unsure if the men would try to shake her and Aminah’s hands, and she didn’t want to offend Faith.

Aminah’s first impression of Abdur-Rahman was reflected in her bewilderment when he came into the living room carrying two animal cages, one holding a pair of birds and the other a hamster. He introduced himself as Abdur-Rahman, but during dinner (which, thankfully, ended up being separate from the men) Aminah learned from his mother that his real name was Theodore. He chose the Arabic name that meant servant of the Most Merciful because he liked the meaning and its implication of God’s mercy to all creatures. When he read that it was one of the two names most beloved to the Creator himself, he announced it would be his.

Abdur-Rahman had carried the two cages at his side with his arms out and elbows bent, making it easy for him to lift each cage as he included his pets in any conversation he was having.

“Did you hear that, Freddie? The young madam’s name is Aminah,” he said after holding a similar conversation with Ismael and Sarah. Sulayman hadn’t come, and right then Aminah envied him. “And she looks a bit scared,” he said to the hamster. “Go on, tell her you don’t bite.” He lowered his voice and whispered audibly, “And tell her I don’t either.”

Aminah heard Faith and her mother laugh, and when she looked up, she saw her father suppressing a grin. But she could tell he was as uncomfortable as she with the exchange. Thankfully, Abdur-Rahman didn’t attempt to shake her hand and instead sat on the couch next to her father, setting the cages on either side of him so that Ismael was sitting next to the birds. Abdur-Rahman ran a hand through his dirty-blond hair that hung just below his ears and smiled at no one in particular as he spread his arms on the back of the couch.

His brown eyes were two different hues, one a shade darker than his hair and the other hazel. For some reason, they seemed to fit him, and

Aminah found it difficult not to stare, not only because of his bizarre appearance but because he seemed so at ease and carefree in his peculiarity. She would have thought him oblivious to how he appeared to others, but there was an air of benevolence about him that made her suspect he was neither aware nor oblivious. He was who he was, and that was enough for him. Now with one foot resting with its ankle on a knee, he said, “So what brings you guys to our world?”

Aminah was not surprised to learn that he had skipped two grades and was prevented from skipping more only because of his parents’ concern about his socialization. In the middle of ninth grade, Faith told Sarah over the course of their budding friendship, she pulled Theodore out of school and home-schooled him. He frequently took trips with his father and sometimes read three books in a day throughout the course of his home education. He finished high school at fourteen and undergrad at seventeen, a philosophy major. He delayed his masters so he could travel and finally completed it at twenty-one, this time in political science. He would have gone on to get his PhD, but he was tired of school, he had told his mother, contending he learned more from books, travel, and people. It wasn’t a surprise to his parents when he followed his heart and opened up a pet store that was unique because it was the only one that offered pet entertainment and pampering on call. He even had a pet-sitting segment, which he operated from his office at the back of the store. Though it wasn’t what she envisioned for her son, Faith supported Teddy because it was what he loved.

“So what inspired you to finally accept Islam?” Ismael had asked Abdur-Rahman while they still sat on the couch with the animals.

“There was this prostitute,” Abdur-Rahman said, and Aminah winced. She glanced around the room, pretending to be undisturbed. She couldn’t look at her parents because she knew their eyes would reflect what she felt. “I read how she fed this thirsty dog. And just like that, all her sins were forgiven.”

Oh. Aminah exhaled, having not realized she was holding her breath. She had read the story. It was one of the famous stories told by the Prophet to demonstrate the vastness of Allah’s mercy, and to encourage kind treatment to His creatures.

Aminah closed the window on the computer screen and pulled a book from the stack next to the monitor so she wouldn’t have to explain to her mother what she had been doing. Of course, her father knew. Aminah and Zaid communicated through Ismael’s e-mail account so that he could stay abreast of their correspondence and prevent writing or talking for leisure.

Although Aminah had seen Zaid on occasion, she had never spoken to him, not even on the phone. She learned four months before that he was interested in her after her father told her Zaid had called to express

interest in marriage. Ismael had asked what she knew of him. Taken aback by the brother's interest, she told her father that she only knew that he was the cousin of one of Tamika's friends whose family was helping with the food preparation for the *walimah*.

After talking to her father, Aminah had wanted to call Zahra, Zaid's cousin, but she called Tamika instead. Surprised, Tamika said that Zahra had never mentioned him, and she openly wondered if Zahra knew. A week later Tamika called to tell Aminah that Zahra's entire family knew but was discouraging him because there was a distant cousin of his he was expected to marry.

"We're going out," Sarah said, and Aminah turned to see her mother peering through the door. "You need anything?"

Aminah shook her head. "I'm fine."

"We'll be back late, *inshaAllaah*." Sarah started to close the door. "If you don't mind, can you put the rest of the laundry away? It's in the family room."

Sarah was gone before Aminah could respond. Aminah wished she hadn't closed the e-mail window. Now she couldn't access the account. Her father had left Zaid's e-mail open for her so she could reply. But she didn't have the password to access the account herself. There was more she wanted to say in response to his explanation of his idea of establishing an Islamic household.

Aminah waited until she heard her parents leave before drafting the rest of her reply in text format. She saved the draft and planned to read over it after she finished putting away the clothes. She was a bit exhausted from cleaning the bathrooms and walls and helping her mother dust all the rooms, but she knew her mother wanted everything perfect before tomorrow, when guests would begin arriving.





## Two

“I’m not looking forward to this.” Tamika carefully applied mascara to her eyes in front of the full length mirror affixed to the door of her bedroom. It was an hour after sunset, and they were still exhausted from the graduation that morning. Thankfully, Sulayman and Tamika had been excused from going to the restaurant for brunch with the family, since they had a lot to do before tonight.

“I’m not either.” Sulayman pulled on his black dress socks from where he sat on the edge of their bed behind Tamika, enabling him to talk to her reflection.

“You talked to your family?” he asked after a second’s thought.

“Mm hm. They called yesterday from the hotel.”

“Who came?”

“From Milwaukee, Aunt Jackie and my mom. I saw them at the graduation. I wanted to introduce you, but that was before we found each other.”

“None of your cousins came?”

Tamika shook her head as she returned the top to the mascara and secured it. “Only Ayanna.” A smile crept on one side of her mouth. “She had nothing better to do.”

Sulayman laughed. “Curiosity then?”

His wife nodded as she set the mascara case on the night stand next to the bed. “Mostly.”

“Your brother and sister?”

“I haven’t heard from Latonya. She should’ve gotten in late last night. But I didn’t see her this morning. I doubt Philip is with her though. He’s hard to catch up with. But I’m sure he would’ve refused to ride all the way from Chicago. With a paid plane ticket, he might consider.”

Tamika ran her fingers through her permed hair. Her hairdresser had styled it that morning and neatly trimmed it in a wrap so that the hair fell down the back of her neck and reached around until the rest rested against one shoulder blade. The hair dresser had already done Tamika’s makeup, but Tamika wanted to reapply some fresh mascara and lipstick before they left for the banquet hall.

“The way you describe them, it’s hard to believe they’re twins.”

“Fraternal.”

“Well, that’s obvious.”

They both laughed.

"I'm sure she would've brought Tyrone along though. I hope so anyway. I want to see Nikki and Tareq."

"You think she would've left Tyrone to babysit?"

Tamika grinned as she found the lipstick she wanted and returned to the mirror before removing the cap. "I wouldn't put it past her."

Sulayman stood and examined his black dress pants to make sure he hadn't wrinkled them while sitting. "Hopefully I'll get a chance to do *da'wah*."

"To Tyrone?"

"And Philip." He buttoned his white dress shirt and left the top button. "If my uncle came, maybe him too."

Tamika raised her eyebrows from where she applied lipstick in the mirror. "That should be interesting."

"You never know."

She nodded as she puckered her lips then rubbed them together to distribute the maroon color evenly. "That's true. It's just that I can't imagine your aunt or uncle Muslim. Of course, I never met your uncle Justin, but Kate—"

"Yeah, she has a lot to overcome."

"Can you imagine what she would do about her job? A news anchor? *SubhaanAllaah*."

"I think about that sometimes. But I think it's beginning to run her down."

"You think?"

"A career can only do so much for you." He picked up a brush and groomed the shadow of hair on his head then his beard. "I figure at a certain point, you have to want something more from life. She's not getting any younger."

"Your grandmother would have a heart attack."

Sulayman laughed. "Yes, she would. She's still holding on to the belief that my mother is going through a phase. And she's been Muslim for over twenty years."

"I just hope she doesn't pass out when she finds out the men and women are having separate parties."

He grinned. "That should be interesting. But I don't think my grandmother was able to come. She was sick, and, last I heard, her doctor advised her not to travel."

There was a long pause. "You think your mother warned them about the separation? Your aunt and uncle, I mean."

He shook his head. "Why should she? We shouldn't have to explain ourselves. But I'm sure Kate already knows. She's been helping Mom plan the whole event."

Tamika sighed. "I told my family. But I think Tonya expected that."

My mom just got quiet when I told her.”

“It shouldn’t make too much of a difference. The men and women will be in the same building. It’s not like they have to drive to two different places.”

Tamika toyed with the cap of the lipstick and studied it as she twisted it back and forth. “This is new for me too. It feels weird.” She felt her husband studying her reflection from where he stood. Seconds later she felt Sulayman behind her until he brushed against her, obstructing the reflection of the rest of the room. He placed both hands on her shoulders and smiled as their eyes met in the mirror.

“Have I told you how beautiful you are?”

She laughed beside herself. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m telling you again.”

He leaned over her shoulder and pressed his cheek against hers. Seeing their faces side by side always amazed Tamika. Her honey brown skin and almond colored eyes and his light russet tone and emerald green eyes. It often made her smile. Such an odd pair, and a perfect match.

“What are you thinking?” Tamika said.

“I’m remembering your face when I came into the imam’s office that day when you thought you were meeting Omar.”

She grinned. “You still remember?”

“I’ll never forget.”

“Why?”

“Because I was scared I’d lose you.”

Tamika shut her eyes momentarily and rested her hand on his opposite cheek, the coarse hair of his beard tickling her fingers as she pulled his face closer to hers. “I never knew you even knew my name.”

“I knew your name long before that. And I wanted to marry you then.”

“You’re lying.” Her eyes accused him playfully.

“When I saw you for the first time, *subhaanAllaah*, I never knew a women could be so beautiful.”

“I wasn’t even Muslim then,” she said with a smile.

“You were still beautiful.”

“Were you really scared?”

“Of course I was. That’s why I told Imam Abdul-Quddus not to tell you who you were meeting. I thought maybe you wanted to marry Omar.”

Tamika laughed and shook her head. “I didn’t. But I had convinced myself that I should. Because I thought I’d never be able to marry you.” She released his face, and they turned to face each other.

“I don’t know what I would’ve done had you not argued with Aminah about letting me marry Aidah.”

She lowered her gaze and shook her head, but she was still smiling. “I hate myself for doing that.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“It wasn’t Aminah’s fault. I should’ve called you to apologize for getting upset instead of letting the rest of the year pass. It only made sense for you to reconsider Aidah. I’d cut off everything between us.”

They walked over to the bed and sat next to each other, and Sulayman took her hand. “You don’t know how bad I felt for going to Milwaukee without telling you.”

Tamika shook her head, toying with the lipstick case in her free hand. “And I can’t believe how upset I was at you for going. I felt like a fool when my aunt said you were right for coming.”

“No, I wasn’t right. Allah was just merciful.”

“You were right. It even made Aunt Jackie question her faith. She didn’t know anything about Islam before you talked to them.

“Did I tell you about the dream my mom had in the hospital?”

Sulayman nodded. “She called me your husband.”

“*SubhaanAllaah*. When I was reciting Qur’an next to her, she thought it was the most beautiful song she ever heard.”

He shook his head. “*SubhaanAllaah*.”

“And she wasn’t even awake.”

“May Allah guide her.”

“Ameen.”



Sarah glanced at her watch as she took a sip from the party glass filled with sparkling apple juice that the hostesses were refilling at the tables. Tamika and Sulayman should be arriving any minute. Sarah had made sure everything was in place. Nusaybah was waiting in the dressing room connected to the women’s section of the banquet facility. Nusaybah had already done Tamika’s hair and make up that morning, but she would touch up Tamika before the guest of honor took her seat at the main table that was on a raised platform at the front of the hall. The dressing room was connected to the hall by a door that opened to the platform steps so that Tamika could emerge to her place without using the main doors at the back. A microphone was set up in front of the platform, and Khadijah, who would sing a song, sat at her table in the front on the far right of the platform.

Sarah resisted checking with Nusaybah to see if Tamika had arrived. She had just checked ten minutes ago. To pass time, Sarah had introduced herself to Tamika’s family and chatted with them at their table

that was next to her family's. Tamika's aunt and mother were nice enough, but Sarah couldn't relax in their presence. She was unable to shake the feeling that she was being judged. Sarah had no idea how much they knew about her, but she thought she sensed their surprise upon seeing her. Whether it was that she was White or that she was actually normal and Muslim at the same time, she had no idea. Often it was a mixture of both with people. If the person had known Ismael before meeting her, they always seemed a bit taken aback by her race. In the beginning, she would request that Ismael let them know beforehand that his wife wasn't Black too. But he refused, perhaps because he was offended that she assumed his friends' wives would be so superficial. Where they lived, and elsewhere for that matter, most of the Muslims who were indigenous Americans were Black, Ismael would remind her. So their shock, if related to her race at all, had more to do with meeting a White Muslim than the fact that he had married one.

"Sister Sarah?"

Sarah turned from where she was sitting and met the eyes of a strikingly beautiful woman whose face was vaguely familiar to her. Sarah smiled and creased her forehead as she searched the features to recall who the woman was. It wasn't uncommon for it to take a moment to recognize a close friend at formal parties. Most Muslim women covered in Islamic garb outside their home, so it was normal to never see more than the face and hands of even friends unless they had the opportunity to visit while the husband wasn't there, or at least in a part of the house where men wouldn't pass.

Sarah shook her head, apologizing with her eyes and smile. Because the woman had prefaced Sarah's name with *Sister*, Sarah imagined she could be a friend of Tamika's or Aminah's. Sarah's peers generally referred to her by her first name.

"Alika Mitchell."

"Ah!" Laughing in recognition, Sarah stood and embraced her. Alika had recited the *shahaadah* at the *masjid* recently. Seeing the new Muslim's eyes fill with tears that day as she recited the testimony of faith to enter Islam made tears well in her own, reminding Sarah of her own conversion. Eyes still wet with tears, Sarah had embraced her new sister in Islam and introduced herself. They exchanged numbers, but Sarah had been so busy with the *walimah* preparations that she hadn't found the opportunity to call. She was glad Aminah or Tamika had thought to give Alika an invitation because Sarah certainly hadn't remembered. "As-salaamu'alaikum."

"Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam."

"From Nigeria, right?"

Alika smiled. "My grandmother is. But the rest of my family's American."

Sarah nodded. "I remember you telling me that." She shook her head, still smiling. "How long has it been?"

Alika narrowed her eyes as she tried to recall. "It'll be four months in a week."

"*MashaAllaah*. How has it been?"

Alika's smile grew broad, revealing a perfect set of white teeth, accented by deep burgundy lipstick. She lifted her bare shoulders and held them in that position momentarily, unsure what to say. Two thin burgundy spaghetti straps revealed smooth antique bronze skin, accented by the 22-karat gold necklace that dipped just below her throat. Matching cone-shaped earrings dangled from her ears, and Sarah could only stare. Alika's eyes were luminous ebony and emanated kindness and profundity. Her hair was a mass of tight curls ducking and reaching until their thickness stood as a soft and beautiful Afro that exuded a self-pride softened only by the delicate features of her face. Sarah could hardly believe this was the same young woman whom she'd met after *Jumu'ah* months before.

"Mm, okay."

"You feel overwhelmed?" Sarah said jokingly, pulling out a chair in an invitation for the woman to take a seat.

Sitting down, Alika nodded. "A little."

"I'm sorry I haven't been much help," Sarah said as she sat back down. "I've been so distracted."

"It's okay. I understand."

"You meet a lot of people?"

"Not really. But Nusaybah has been helping me a lot."

"Oh, *mashaAllaah*, you met."

Alika nodded. "I stayed with her for a couple of weeks to—"

"Is everything okay?" Sarah's forehead creased in concern.

Alika laughed and waved a hand. "Yes, everything's fine. I was just staying with her to learn the prayers."

"Oh, *mashaAllaah*."

"I've been really busy, but I didn't want to procrastinate too much. I felt bad just going through the motions." She laughed. "Literally."

"You're in school?"

She nodded. "Doing my master's."

"Your masters? You look so young."

"I'm twenty seven."

Sarah raised her eyebrows and shook her head. "You could pass for nineteen."

Alika smiled and nodded, apparently accustomed to the comment. "This is actually my second master's."

"Really?"

"I did my first in education. Now I'm doing multicultural studies."

“Sounds interesting. What did you study for undergrad?”

“History.”

“Think you might go for your doctorate?”

Alika’s eyes widened playfully, but before she could respond a hushed silence filled the room, and Sarah and Alika turned to see Tamika taking her seat before the crowd. On cue, Khadijah began to sing, and the guests sat speechless, entranced both by Khadijah’s voice and Tamika’s astonishing appearance. The lights dimmed until only Tamika and Khadijah could be seen. Tamika smiled nervously, unsure what to do with the spotlight on her. Someone caught Tamika’s eye and she waved her hand for them to sit next to her, apparently for moral support. A moment later Aminah and Zahra took seats on either side of Tamika, and Tamika seemed to relax.

After the song, Aminah and Zahra said something to Tamika and left the podium. A minute later, they accompanied Tamika’s aunt and mother to the seats, which in Sarah’s estimation was a good call. Tamika’s aunt and mother beamed with pride that revealed itself through their dignified smiles, controlled only by their lips pressed together to stifle the grins that sought release.

Sarah saw Kate whiz by, giving instructions to each of the hostesses, who nodded and disappeared into the kitchen then emerged with plates to serve the guests. Sarah smiled. Her sister was definitely one to take charge. Although she felt indebted to Kate for all her help, Sarah doubted Kate would have been able to sit still as a mere guest. For one, it wasn’t her personality. And she was definitely out of her element. Surrounded by only women, Kate didn’t know how to behave in a formal dress. She was used to dancing and meeting prospects. Today she would have to settle for just being Kate, the aunt. It made Sarah stifle a laugh at the thought.

When Kate appeared breathless at her side a minute later, Sarah was startled, having not seen her sister next to her until she heard her sigh. “God, I’m beat.” Kate took a sip of the untouched apple juice at the place next to Sarah.

“I’m Alika.”

“Kate.” They shook hands, reaching over the space in front of Sarah.

“I’m sorry.” Sarah shook her head, apologizing for not introducing them. “This is my sister.”

“How long have you been Muslim?” Alika said.

Kate laughed. “Me? I haven’t converted yet.”

Sarah caught the word *yet* and grinned at her sister, but apparently Kate didn’t realize what she had said, at least not the implications of it.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought—”

“It’s okay.” Kate waved her hand. “I’ve given many wrong impressions in my life. Trust me, I’m flattered by that one.”

Sarah laughed to herself, understanding the hidden truth behind what Kate had left unsaid.

“What about you?” Kate asked.

“Four months.”

“Wow. You’re brave.”

Alika laughed. “No, I’m scared to death actually. That’s why I became Muslim.”

“Interesting way of putting it,” Kate said with a shrug, her eyes tracing the ballroom momentarily. “But I know what you mean.”

Sarah stared at her sister. “I would’ve never guessed.”

“Everybody’s scared,” Kate said to her sister with a forced smile. “Even me.” She tapped a neatly polished nail against her glass then turned her attention back to Alika. “Your family doesn’t mind?”

Alika smiled and drew in a deep breath before exhaling. “They don’t know yet.”

“How do you manage to hide it from them?”

“My parents live in Maryland.”

“You’re on your own?” Kate sounded surprised.

“She’s twenty seven,” Sarah said.

“Wow. I’d have sworn you were in high school.”

Alika laughed.

“You married?” Kate asked.

Alika shook her head.

“Join the club.”

Sarah thought of the Syrian man Kate had wanted to marry, and she wondered what had become of him.

“But I’m working on it,” Kate said.

Alika smiled.

“You?”

She shook her head, a pleasant smile still on her face. “I’m still getting used to the whole settle-down thing.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. Muslims have an easier time getting married it seems. At least that’s what Sarah tells me.”

Sarah stared at her sister on the verge of laughter. “I never said anything like that.”

“Maybe not. But I can see it all the same.”

She shook her head at Kate.

“Maybe it’s because they double up.”

Alika seemed taken aback by the comment, but she held her smile. “Double up?”

Sarah’s cheeks grew warm, and she tried to think of a way to quiet her sister. Kate had no idea that polygamy wasn’t the best topic of discussion for a new Muslim. Most likely, Alika had read about it, but for the most part, it remained a matter of theoretical acceptance for most



American Muslims. Including Sarah.

“Polygamy.”

Alika blinked, a chuckle of uncertainty escaping with that motion, apparently finding Kate more amusing than her topic of conversation.

“It’s not that common,” Sarah said quickly, her voice on the edge of laughter that she hoped undermined, if not ridiculed, Kate’s statement.

“More common than where I’m from.”

Alika only nodded, unsure how to take Kate.

“Should be made legal if you ask me,” Kate said with a laugh and Sarah cringed. Ever since Kate had met the Syrian who worked with her at the television station, Kate imagined she wouldn’t mind polygamy after all, if it meant she could be with him. It had been a disappointment for Sarah’s sister to find out he was married because Kate swore he was the one for her. Of course, Kate didn’t know he was Muslim until he told her some time after they were working on an assignment together.

“What do you think?” Kate said, taking another sip of juice.

Alika smiled, but she shrugged, revealing a discomfort that, evidently, only Sarah was aware of. “If God allows it, then I suppose it only makes sense to make it legal.”

“You American?”

“Yes.” She seemed to hesitate, unsure of the relevance the question held. “But my grandmother’s from Nigeria.”

“So you know what I mean.”

Alika nodded slowly. “It’s common there,” she said with reluctance, growing more uncomfortable with the discussion. She glanced around the room, and Sarah could tell that Alika was offended.

“Boy how I’d love to live there.”

Sarah felt herself getting upset. She wished Kate would shut up. She knew Kate didn’t mean any of what she was saying. If the Syrian man had been single, she would’ve thought polygamy the most backward institution in the modern world.

“Kate,” Sarah said, nudging her sister. She hoped Kate would catch the hint without an explanation. But it was too late. Alika had stood, now excusing herself from their company.

She extended her hand to Sarah then Kate. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too,” Kate said, still cheerful, oblivious to the harm she’d done.

“You too,” Sarah said barely above a whisper, too ashamed to look Alika in the eye.



“So you, uh,” Justin coughed, bringing a loose fist to his mouth to cover it, “bring these animals wherever you go.”

“Whenever I can,” Abdur-Rahman said, tapping lightly on the bird-cage that sat perched on his lap at a guest table near the back of the men’s ballroom. One of the birds turned and flew to where Abdur-Rahman was wedging his finger inside. He smiled as his pet seemed to nibble at his finger with its beak. “But I only bring Freddie and Freda to events like these. Charlie doesn’t like ‘em too much.”

“Charlie?”

“My hamster.”

Justin nodded, glancing around the room, rolling his empty glass between his hands. He saw Sulayman shaking the hands of some of the guests and embracing others as he made his way around the room. He couldn’t get over his nephew’s beard. It seemed so awkward and unbecoming of a boy so young. He didn’t understand Sarah. Could she really be serious about all this? He had tried to find her earlier, but a man, who apparently was a security guard of some sort, told him he couldn’t go past the bathrooms at the end of the hall. That was the women’s section.

“Is there any religious significance to the birds?”

Abdur-Rahman laughed but continued to play with the bird, moving his finger to different parts of the cage, his pet following in apparent enjoyment. He smiled and shook his head playfully at the bird, his hair moving slightly with the motion. He leaned forward so he could be in its full view. “To me there is.”

“How’s that?”

“Islam teaches kind treatment to all creatures.”

“How is that different from any other religion?” Justin raised an eyebrow as he studied Abdur-Rahman laughing and playing with his pets.

“It’s more specific and detailed in Islam.”

Justin tucked his lower lip and nodded, toying with his glass again. He lifted his arm and bent it to look at his Rolex. He wondered how much longer he should be polite before making up some excuse to go. He would rather be with Kate, though he doubted she would bore him any less. He looked up and saw Sulayman greeting a group of men three tables away. He wondered if Sulayman would feel obligated to sit with him. He hoped not. Justin had no idea what he would say to his sister’s son. He barely knew the young man. And that’s how he liked it. If Kate and his mother hadn’t pressed him to come, he would be home with his wife and children right then.

“You American originally?” Justin asked, relieved that Abdur-Rahman had stopped, at least momentarily, playing with the birds.

“I converted three years ago.”

Justin gathered his dark eyebrows in surprise. “But your name is Islamic.”

Abdur-Rahman placed the cage on the empty seat next to him. “Real name’s Theodore. But my family and friends call me Teddy.”

“Why’d you convert?”

“Because it’s true.”

Justin’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “What’s true?”

“The religion.”

He shrugged and sighed of boredom. “All of ‘em are.”

Abdur-Rahman folded his arms across his chest and chuckled, apparently enjoying a private joke. It made Justin uncomfortable. “Not possible.”

“Son, people believe what they want. You’ll realize that sooner or later.” There was an edge of bitterness in his voice, and Justin could tell Abdur-Rahman caught it.

“Not always.”

Justin laughed as if he didn’t have the energy for youthful naïveté. “Don’t know any exceptions myself.”

“You included?”

He regarded the boy closely, not caring if his scorn was manifested. He was disturbed by the know-it-all smirk the boy wore, the way he crossed his arms with his hands tucked under his armpits, and his different color eyes, each of them seeming to hold a separate view but shared judgment of Justin.

“Life doesn’t give you much choice,” Justin said finally. He readjusted his wristwatch and exhaled, his nose flaring slightly.

“Life is choice.”

“To the dreamer.”

Abdur-Rahman continued to smirk, the dusty bottoms of his patent leather shoe facing the chair between them as he rested his ankle on a knee.

“Justin,” Sulayman said, reaching out to shake his uncle’s hand. Neither he nor Aminah could bring themselves to put the formal *Aunt* or *Uncle* before his or Kate’s names. They suspected it would be more offensive than polite given the distance their aunt and uncle wished to keep from Sarah since she accepted Islam. Sulayman couldn’t deny it would be a bit awkward in any case. They were more like neighbors compelled to live next to one another than family.

Justin stood, and Sulayman felt the choreographed politeness in his uncle’s firm shake and broad smile that was unable to simulate either cordiality or pleasure in being here tonight. But Sulayman was grateful, nonetheless, that Justin had come. It must have been a huge sacrifice for a busy lawyer like him.

“You’re related?” Amusement lit Abdur-Rahman’s eyes and he nodded as if he had just then understood the punch line to a joke told an hour before.

“Justin, this is Abdur-Rahman. Abdur-Rahman, my uncle Justin.”

“We met,” Justin said as he smoothed the lapels of his suit jacket upon sitting back down.

“Your uncle was just telling me his philosophy of life.”

Sulayman raised his eyebrows in pleasure as he sat down across from them, but he noticed Justin’s irritation despite effort to appear polite. “What’s that?”

“The only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth,” Abdur-Rahman said, nodding in apparent pleasure with his observation.

Though obviously still a bit agitated, Justin seemed to calm at the response, as if he were expecting Abdur-Rahman to say something terse, if not wholly inappropriate. Perhaps the eloquence of Abdur-Rahman’s words made Justin see his philosophy as more academic than cynical.

“Philosophy one-oh-one,” Sulayman said with a smile of recognition. “The classic paradox of modern thought.”

Justin nodded, his expression more curious than disconcerted. “You studied philosophy in school?”

“I double majored in chemistry and biology in undergrad,” Sulayman said. “But I took some courses.”

“You doing graduate work now?”

“I’m in medical school.”

Justin’s brows rose in surprise. “Where? Here in Atlanta?”

“Emory.”

He nodded, unable to conceal his admiration. “A lot of Muslims at the school?”

“Quite a few, actually.”

“American?”

“Mostly from Pakistan.”

“And your sister?”

“She studied chemistry, but she took a year off after undergrad.”

“Where’d she study?”

“Streamsdale.”

The flutter of bird wings filled the silence, and Abdur-Rahman picked up the cage and checked on the birds before putting it back on the chair.

“She wear that, uh, cloth on her head while she’s there?”

Sulayman nodded. “She’s worn it ever since middle school.”

Justin toyed with his glass, but he seemed to be reflecting on what his nephew said. “What’s the point of it? I mean, all the clothes?”

“*As-salaamu’alaikum, man!*”

Sulayman turned to find Omar standing behind him. Coming to his feet, Sulayman laughed and shook the brother’s hand then pulled him in a stiff hug that was more a mutual smack on the back. The strength in Omar’s arm left Sulayman’s back stinging for several seconds. Even in

the long-sleeved white *thobe* that extended to the middle of Omar's calves, his muscular arms bulged, hinting to the days he played football before a case of bad company landed him in jail, where he found Islam. His coffee brown face was still stingy, giving him only a stubble of facial hair despite Omar's efforts to grow a beard.

"*Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam wa rahmatullaahi wa barakaatuh.*"

"Congratulations, *ak*," Omar said, abbreviating the Arabic term that meant *my brother*, as was customary among African-American Muslims. "You one lucky man."

"Justin, Abdur-Rahman, this is Omar." Omar reached over the table and shook their hands, greeting them with the standard Muslim greeting. But only Abdur-Rahman replied.

"Omar, this is my uncle Justin," Sulayman said, gesturing toward him. "And Abdur-Rahman."

Omar took a seat next to Sulayman. "Woe, what's this?" One side of his mouth turned up in a grin as he saw the birds fluttering about in the cage. He chuckled, looking to his right to see if this was a joke of Sulayman's.

"Omar, meet Freddie and Freda." Abdur-Rahman lifted the cage and nodded to the new guest. "Freddie, Freda, meet Omar." The birds actually seemed to nod too, and Omar burst out laughing. He hit a hand on the table, causing it to shake slightly, then gripped Sulayman's shoulder with a nod of approval.

"Man, I always knew you were whack. I'd never think to invite birds to my *walimah*."

Sulayman chuckled and shook his head. "They're not my guests. They're Abdur-Rahman's pets."

"No, sh—," Omar stopped himself. "No kidding?" He scratched at the beard hair on his face and opened his mouth slightly in amusement.

"I take them wherever I can. They get lonely when I'm not there."

Omar exploded in laughter, rocking back and forth in his chair, his hand covering his mouth. His laugh culminated into a coughing spell, and he placed one hand on the table to compose himself. When he finally got himself under control, he wore a grin and shook his head. "I like you, man. You cool." He nodded, placing both hands on the table to smooth out the tablecloth that he had unintentionally tousled during his laughter. "Where you from?"

"I live here in Georgia."

Justin wore an uncomfortable smile that tugged at one side of his mouth, unsure how to take the sudden disruption that had cut him off in the middle of an inquiry. He glanced around the room, but Sulayman could tell the motion was more to mask his apparent embarrassment at being slighted by this animated character of a person.

"The clothes are worn as an act of obedience to God," Sulayman said.

It took a moment for Justin to realize Sulayman was talking to him. Justin nodded, appearing a bit more relaxed though his discomfort in the increased company was noticeable.

“So, uh,” Justin said, “why all the security tonight?”

“Security?”

“Preventing me from seeing my sister.”

Sulayman chuckled. “At functions like these, the men and women are separated so the women can feel comfortable and dress as they like.”

“Why can’t they dress as they like all the time?”

There was a brief silence at the table, and Omar chuckled, a smug grin on his face as he studied Justin.

“They can,” Abdur-Rahman cut in, smiling. “But for those who like to cover themselves in front of men, the separation is for them.”

“All your wedding parties are like this? Bride and groom in different rooms?”

“No,” Sulayman said. “It depends on the bride and groom.”

“Some Muslims have typical American weddings,” Abdur-Rahman said.

Justin nodded, and Sulayman could tell he was relaxing a little more although Sulayman imagined Justin couldn’t help feeling outnumbered at the table.

“What’s the difference?” Justin said.

“Between the weddings?” Sulayman asked.

“No, your marriages.”

“Nothing, I imagine,” he said. “Once you’re married, you pretty much live like any normal couple.”

“Naw, man,” Omar interrupted, shaking his head, still wearing that grin that seemed a part of him now. “That ain’t true.”

Justin looked at Omar, as did everyone else, surprised by his words.

“I know you ain’t been out there like a lot of us,” Omar said to Sulayman. “But it ain’t nothing like a Muslim woman. I had mad girlfriends in the *dunya*, man, and not one of ‘em compare to a Muslim wife.”

“What do you mean?” Justin said, creasing his forehead and leaning forward until his elbows rested on the table.

“Man, you know how it is,” Omar said, shaking his head in apparent recollection of more than the conversation gave him opportunity to share. His grin was now replaced by a reflective hint of a smile. “You takin’ your woman out and she puts on this bangin’ dress. And you thinkin’ how good she look, and you know every dog up in that joint see what you see. And then she get to talkin’ and laughin’ wit’ ‘em, and you like, *damn baby, chill*. And she like, *it’s all good, we just talkin’*.” He shook his head again. “Naw, it ain’t like that with a Muslim.”

“I know what you mean,” Abdur-Rahman agreed. “I was with my ex-girlfriend for seven years, and we lived together for the last two. She said

I was overprotective and sexist. She'd go out with her male friends or talk on the phone to them for hours." He laughed then shook his head. "Sometimes, when she was going out, I'd ask her where she was going, and she wouldn't tell me, saying I didn't trust her. Or if I asked her not to go, she'd say she was going anyway. I felt like her roommate."

"In Islam, man," Omar said, "you got everything laid out. You know your job, and she knows hers. Cuts out a lot o' madness, man. No joke."

"A lot of non-Islamic marriages have the same thing," Justin said. "You just have to find someone with shared values."

"I feel you," Omar said. "But problems always come up, man. In Islam, you have something to back you up." He chuckled. "Or set you straight." After a moment's pause, he said, "And it ain't always about the woman. You can't be buggin' and havin' all these females all up in your joint, talkin' about they just friends. In Islam, men and women got the same rules when it comes to that."

"Are you married?" Justin asked.

"Yeah, man."

"For how long?"

"One and a half years."

"You?" Justin glanced toward Abdur-Rahman.

Abdur-Rahman smiled and shook his head. "Not yet."

"You plan to marry a Muslim?"

"For sure, *inshaAllaah*. God-willing," he added, realizing he had used the Arabic expression with Justin.

"You have to?"

"No, but I don't want anything else."

"You converted too?" Justin looked at Omar.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

A grin formed on one side of Omar's mouth and his eyes grew reflective. "Man, when Islam come at you, you only got two choices. Submit or run."

"Was it an easy transition?"

"Naw, man, I ain't even gonna lie. But it gets easier."

Abdur-Rahman nodded in agreement. "For me, the hardest thing was getting over what the world would think. Because once you study it, you know it's true. You just don't want the burden of telling the world that." He smiled. "But I was lucky. My father came home from a trip to Syria and said he had something to talk to me about, and I told him the same. Turns out we had the same confession."

Justin's eyes revealed surprise and he chuckled. Inside Sulayman smiled, realizing it was his uncle's first sincere expression of pleasure that night.



Aminah stood before the mirror in the dressing room attached to the ballroom as Nusaybah teased Aminah's ash brown hair that was now a rust color from the styling gel that created deep waves surrounding her thin face. Her green eyes were accented in a light application of eyeliner, but there wasn't much Nusaybah could do to give Aminah's pale skin the color Aminah wanted. But the artist had applied a thin layer of foundation to give Aminah's white skin a hint of brown to offer the illusion of a natural tan. Nusaybah had chosen a frosted lip-gloss that would accent the pink of Aminah's lips because a heavy lipstick might offset the desired effect of the foundation.

Aminah's gaze fell to her hands, where she held the note cards she hoped she wouldn't need for this part of the event. Her heart beat faster until it became a pounding that stubbornly reminded her that she didn't want to do this. The role had fallen to her by default, or perhaps necessity. Who else could give the speech preceding the presentation of Tamika's plaque for being the first in her family to graduate from college? Aminah knew her best, having lived with her for nearly three semesters of the school year. She saw Tamika's quiet determination to push herself through school despite her heart being set elsewhere. Aminah herself was inspired by the remarkable acumen and sagacity of the woman whose heart was too big to be confined to the stringent boundaries of a university that harbored too much pride in itself. Tamika had little patience for the trivial, and it was this idiosyncrasy that would taint her college record, albeit unjustly, and land her in a campus apartment with Aminah and Aminah's childhood best friend Durrah.

No, Aminah didn't want this burden. There was far too much to say, and too little that she actually could. How would she stop herself when her words no longer came from a rehearsed tongue but a full heart? This award was not about Tamika's family history. It was about theirs. And they were linked by a history too pronounced to silence and too silenced to pronounce. They were, as it were, sisters long before the infamous *in-law* would be added to it. But she couldn't say that tonight. Tamika's family expected this to be about them. Then again, they, like Tamika, knew nothing of this particular part of the night. They knew, of course, like everyone else, that the celebration was dual, but they didn't know that Aminah and her mother had decided to make the general accolade a tangible one.

"We're ready," Kate said in an audible whisper, peering in the door and disappearing a second later.

Nusaybah smiled at Aminah, and Aminah felt the corners of her mouth turn up in a smile. She stepped out into the brightly lit ball room



and rested the low-heeled shoe of her right foot on the first step leading to the podium, and she thought, heart heavy with sadness, *Durrah should be the one doing this.*

A microphone affixed to a platform awaited Aminah at the top of the portable steps. She stopped and stood before it about five feet from where Tamika sat with her mother and aunt. Apparently, someone had announced that there would be a speech of some sort because the guests were waiting with hushed expectancy as Aminah adjusted the height of the microphone and glanced momentarily at the note cards she'd set beneath it. She skimmed the cards for what she had rehearsed and felt her heart in her throat, conscious of the 11" by 17" oak wood wall plaque that bore the engraving of Tamika's name and distinction and sat behind a table in the dressing room. Aminah felt her sister-in-law's patient gaze as Tamika expected a general thank you to the crowd in celebration of the occasion.

*"Bismillaah, walhamdulillaah, wa salaatu wa salaamu 'alaa rasoolillaah,"* she said, glancing out at the guests for the first time since her ascension to the podium. The room was massive. There was a sea of round tables distributed about the room, each decorated with a white and lavender floral centerpiece atop lilac tablecloths. She felt dizzy and held onto the sides of the platform to compose herself. She whispered a silent prayer to Allah to make this ten-minute speech an ease and comfort for her. *O Allah, there is no ease except in that which you have made easy, and you make the difficult, if you wish, easy.* "I begin with the name of God, who alone deserves praise and credit for the good we enjoy and give in this world. And I ask Him to send peace and blessings upon His Messenger, Muhammad, who is last in a long line of messengers before him, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. May peace and blessings be upon them all."

Aminah inhaled deeply and heard the release of her breath in the microphone. She couldn't think of her nervousness, and she forced herself to imagine the people before her as part of the room itself and not as individuals, waiting with expectance, hanging on to her every word. She thought of Tamika, and Durrah. And it was only then that she felt the nervousness subside. She was filled with a singleness of purpose, an assignment only she could fulfill.

"Tonight is a special night," she began, "a night of celebration, a night to thank Allah, thank God for His blessings that are far too infinite to number. On June eighth of last year, my family was blessed with a gift that only God could give. Selfishly, I can say, I was given a sister, the sister I had wanted for so long. For my brother Sulayman, she was, in his words, a blessing, a completion of himself." She smiled. "And I can attest to that, because, believe me, before she finally said yes, he was *not* himself." There was some laughter in the crowd. "Of course, we are speak-

ing of Tamika, Tamika Douglass, who sits before us now, next to her mother Thelma and her aunt Jacqueline. And to you both,” Aminah turned her head slightly to face them, “on behalf of my mother, myself, and, of course, my brother, I thank you. Thank you for sharing her with us. Thank you for sharing a part of you. Without you, there would be no Tamika, and without Tamika there would be no celebration tonight. And we praise and thank Allah for this.”

Aminah glanced at her note cards, skimming the words in that gesture and finding that she had already deviated from her prepared speech. She drew in a deep breath, this time more discreet in her exhale. “And we also thank God for allowing us to gather on the night of a very special event. Many of you attended the graduation ceremony this morning and witnessed Tamika being awarded a bachelor’s degree in religion and honored to be amongst those students who maintained an A or B grade point average throughout their matriculation at Streamsedale. Although we hear of similar ceremonies each year, we are often not aware of the hard work, sacrifice, and significance of such an accomplishment. Yet, we could, in reality, be witnesses to a piece of history unfolding. And that’s what we witnessed this morning. Tamika Douglass, graduate of Streamsedale University on May tenth nineteen ninety seven, was the first in her family to graduate from college and be granted such a degree. So to you, Tamika, we say congratulations, and may God bless you.”

A roar of applause filled the room and seemed to grow louder in a crescendo until everyone was on their feet.

“And to commemorate this day, this honor and achievement, we present to you a customized plaque for you to hang on your wall and, God-willing, the walls of your children and grandchildren, so they can know you as we’ve known you tonight.”

Nusaybah had taken her place at the foot of the steps and now ascended to carry the plaque to Tamika, who met her halfway and now stood a few feet from Aminah with tears glistening in her eyes and shaking her head at Nusaybah for this surprise. She gave Aminah a similar look as Aminah stepped from behind the platform to embrace and congratulate her. The crowd’s applause filled the room again, and everyone remained on their feet.

When everyone had quieted and taken their seats, and Tamika had sat back down next to her mother and aunt who read the award with smiles of pride on their faces, Aminah began to speak again.

“And we cannot forget the people who made this accolade possible. And to Thelma White and Jacqueline Rhodes we present these tokens of thank you.” Nusaybah had descended the steps and now ascended them carrying two 8 ½” by 11” oak-framed certificates and two bouquets of flowers. Surprise lit their eyes, but they maintained their composure as

they stood and accepted their gifts with the shaking of hands as the frames were placed before them at the table. Again, a roar of applause filled the room, and the crowd stood as Tamika hugged her mother and aunt in congratulations, now all three managing to hold back the tears that glistened in their eyes.

“Latonya,” Aminah said with a nod. Her words were barely heard over the applause, and that’s how she liked it. She was able to leave the podium and take a seat at her mother’s table and watch as Tamika’s sister came to the microphone that Khadijah had used earlier.

“This is for you, Tamika,” Latonya said looking at her sister, and the guests grew quiet. Then she turned to where everyone sat. “For those of you who don’t know, I’m Latonya Douglass, Tamika’s big sister. And this song is dedicated to her.”

Latonya shut her eyes as she slowly drew in a deep breath and sang a song that had been their favorite from the moment they heard it in the movie “Beaches”. “I know it was cold there in my shadow, never to have sunlight on your face,” she sang. Tears slipped down Tamika’s cheeks and she made no effort to stop them as she listened to the beautiful words of Bette Midler that she knew her sister was singing from her heart. Tamika’s mother and aunt couldn’t keep the tears from coming, but they dabbed at their eyes to prevent them from sliding down their faces as Latonya sang about her sister being her source of strength.

“Fly,” she sang, “so high you almost touch the sky. Thank you, thank you. Thank God for you, the wind beneath my wings.”



## Three

“I can see why you like her,” Khadijah said as she unfastened the scarf pin from her rayon black scarf before tossing the *khimaar* to the couch, where her matching face veil already lay.

A hesitant smile creased a corner of Omar’s mouth, and Khadijah felt him studying her though she avoided his gaze. She ran a palm over her hair that was braided in cornrows that began at her hairline and met an array of twists that spread over the back of her head. She had gone to a beautician the night before, and Omar had asked about her sudden concern for her appearance. It was only a *walimah*, he had said. Did all Muslim sisters exert so much effort in beautifying themselves for a wedding celebration in which the men and women would have their own separate parties? But she knew Omar wasn’t complaining. It was his way of expressing how refreshing it was to see her elaborately dressed.

“Who said I liked her?”

Khadijah sighed as she let herself collapse on the couch after removing her black *jilbaab* and laying it next to her head cover and face veil. She rolled her eyes and smirked, meeting her husband’s gaze. “Yeah right, babe. I ain’t stupid.”

“Just ‘cause I wanted to marry her don’t mean I like her.”

“If I had any doubts before, I don’t now.”

Omar laughed in self defense, throwing up his arms. “Man, you women read into stuff too much.”

“So I was right.” Khadijah smiled triumphantly and folded her arms.

He shook his head and chuckled. “So what if I did?”

She shrugged. “I was just saying I can see why.”

Omar slid into the couch next to his wife and put an arm around her.

“So you like her?”

She lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “She’s alright.”

“What’d ya’ll do?”

“Sang some songs, ate, you know.”

“Sang?” Omar looked at his wife in surprise. “You sang?”

Khadijah gathered her eyebrows and met his gaze with a smirk.

“What you trying to say?”

“No, I was just surprised.”

“You think I ain’t good enough?”

“No, it ain’t that. I thought you were saying *she* sang.”

She studied her husband for a moment before saying, “She did.” It

was more than she should have shared, but curiosity had a way of taking precedence even when it shouldn't. Besides, she figured he knew more than she could share in any case since he and Tamika had planned to get married at one point.

Omar's eyebrows rose, apparently at a loss for words.

"Why? You didn't know she sang?"

Khadijah watched his gaze fall to the music CDs sprawled on the floor in front of the tall speakers across from the couch, and she forced herself to be patient. She wished she could see inside his head, his heart.

"I knew she used to."

She studied her husband long enough to make him visibly uncomfortable. "Why wouldn't she sing now?"

He took a deep breath, the exaggerated one he took when he had decided any evasiveness on his part could be misinterpreted by Khadijah to mean more than it did. Normally, it bothered her, but tonight she just wanted to hear what he had to say. "Before she became Muslim, she sang all the time. When her friend got killed in a car accident, she stopped."

"You talking 'bout Durrah?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise and he met her gaze. "You knew Dee?"

She shook her head. "I heard of her though. She was in a lot of the papers before she died. But I ain't know Tamika was friends with her."

"They were pretty close. Roommates at Streamsdale. That's how they met."

"I remember reading about the accident." She shook her head. "That was really sad."

"Tamika was in the car."

Khadijah's eyes grew wide. "That night?"

He nodded. "She was in the hospital afterward. But she wasn't Muslim then."

"How long after that she convert?"

"The night she came from the hospital."

Khadijah's gaze grew distant, and she felt the familiar tightening in her chest. She reached the tips of her fingers into her shirt to soothe the area, but, instead, she felt her fingertips massaging the skin over her heart.

"What you thinking?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. He already knew, but the edge in his voice told her he hoped he was wrong. They had been married for seven months before she finally told him the story. And even then, she couldn't look at him, had to imagine the words slipping from her, escaping, taking on a life of their own. She had imagined herself alone, her words less of tongue than mind. It made it easier to speak, to sit still, her fingers grasping her knees, and her eyes narrowed as if she were struggling to read her lines from the aged paint on the apartment walls.

Even then, as she sat there, thinking of Tamika and the tragedy of that night, the memories came as flashes first, then still images as if slides on a projector, then a movie itself.

There was a time Khadijah would have fought the memories, pushed them from her as one fighting for her life. But they would come back only more vividly, more insistently, and corporeal. At the store, the bank, or even years later as a Muslim at *Jumu'ah*, they would come. It would be so unexpected, so inappropriate, so in defiance of logic that she would be shocked, momentarily lost in a world different from the one she was in. *Kiki*, the name, she would hear it, as if whispered into her ear. Or she would hear *Angie*, her own name spoken in Kiki's voice.

A trick of the mind, a hallucination, whatever it was in "reality", at that moment, even if for *only that moment*, it was real. Once, she was walking down the street and saw the diamond-less ring. She was so stunned, so taken aback that it was there, she stopped, stared and finally willed herself to reach for it and pick it up. The heat of the metal stung her fingers, and she examined it closely, confused that it was only a bottle cap.

Another time, she heard the coughing, the gurgling and it only grew louder as she walked away from the source of the sound. For years she couldn't sleep. Slumber would lull her, beg her, but she would refuse. But it would seize her finally, making her prisoner to her dreams. It was then that she and Keiya would switch places, and Angela felt the stinging stab wounds in her own stomach and chest. Khadijah would jolt awake and find herself terrified of the imagined more than the real, although gunshots routinely echoed outside the fragile panes of her window, where gangs ruled the streets. And the three hours until morning felt longer, more torturous than the twelve she pushed herself through at work, not because she couldn't sleep, but because she feared she would.

"Don't think of it too much," Omar said, a gentle voice calling her back.

It took several seconds, but the movie faded, the images releasing her, and she breathed. "I'm okay."

He stood and disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing a minute later with a glass of grape juice in his hand.

"Here," he said, sitting next to her. "Relax."

"It was May twelfth," she said, accepting the glass but only staring at it as she spoke.

"I know, just a day like any day in the year." He put an arm around her. "Babe, you gotta chill."

She nodded. "I'm tryin'."

He sighed, apologizing in that sound. "I know."



“It was nice meeting you too,” Faith said, extending a hand to shake Alika’s as they stood next to Faith’s car. Faith’s brunette hair glistened under the dimly lit parking lot, and Alika felt a tinge of guilt for finding comfort in not being the only one not strong enough to cover her hair fulltime. But she wore a *khimaar* tonight, a loosely draped fabric that covered her hair that was now pulled back by a ponytail holder, making the cloth bulge at the back of her head.

“You too,” Alika said, feeling awkward now that Faith’s son had finished securing the animal cages behind seatbelts in the back seat. He now stood at the passenger’s door, his hair moving gently with the wind as he waited for them to finish talking.

“Next Saturday,” Faith said and Alika nodded.

“I appreciate it.”

Faith waved her hand dismissively. “No, thank *you*. I’m glad to have the opportunity to help with such a worthy project. It’s good that someone’s considering the Muslim point of view. I can’t wait to read it once it’s published.”

Alika laughed self-consciously. “I don’t know if it’ll ever be published, but I hope—”

“Nonsense,” Faith cut her off good-naturedly. “If no one’s got sense enough to see the need for it, publish it yourself. There’s no *multi* in multicultural if Muslims aren’t included. Even those who attempt to tackle that perspective see us as homogenous. I don’t think anyone’s ever researched multicultural awareness among Muslims themselves.”

“That’s why I chose the topic,” Alika said, excited that by next week she would have the perspective of a White Muslim. “The natural diversity is part of what attracted me to Islam. I was already working on the project, but from an African to African-American perspective.”

“That should be quite interesting,” Faith said with a nod. “I would include that too.”

“I plan to. But I want to wait to see the best approach. I’m thinking to compare and contrast somehow between the two groups.”

“This is too unique a research to give to your master’s. Why don’t you delay it for a doctorate thesis?”

“It’s two faceted, actually. I’m doing this phase as a general premise, and the program I’m in allows me to continue the same program and research for my PhD if I keep my same major, or as long as I don’t deviate too far from it.”

“Good,” Faith said, opening the driver’s side door. “I’m on board. But we’ll talk.”

“Thanks.”

“No,” she said with a smile, “thank *you*.”

Alika turned to go, and she heard Faith’s son ask about her before his voice faded as he climbed inside the car and shut the door. She wondered if he would be willing to be a part of her research too. She would be interested in hearing his point of view. Faith had told Alika that her husband was a writer and traveled a lot, often internationally, and on occasion their son accompanied him. Faith had said her husband would be more than willing to talk to Alika after returning from his most recent trip, but now Alika wondered if Faith’s son wouldn’t mind participating too.

“Oh, there you are.”

Alika lifted her gaze from where she was looking into her purse for her car keys as she walked. Alika smiled as Sarah approached her.

“Thanks so much for coming tonight,” Sarah said, linking her arm through Alika’s, making Alika slightly uncomfortable at the show of affection. Alika decided to dig out her keys once she was at the car.

“I enjoyed it,” Alika said.

“Well, I’m glad you came.”

“It was really nice. This is my first *walimah*.”

Sarah laughed in pleasure. “Well, I hope it was a good experience.”

Alika nodded. “It was.”

They walked in silence in the dark parking lot.

“I’m sorry about my sister.”

Alika creased her forehead in confusion and looked at Sarah. “Sorry for what?”

“My sister Kate,” Sarah said. “She isn’t Muslim and doesn’t understand things correctly.”

Alika relaxed her forehead as she recalled the uncomfortable discussion, but she was still a bit confused. “Did she say something wrong?”

“No,” Sarah said as if choosing her words carefully. “But I just wanted you to know, I’m sorry if she offended you in any way.”

Alika nodded, lost in thought momentarily. “It’s okay,” she lied, stopping behind her car and feeling Sarah’s arm loosen until it released Alika. Sarah’s hands rested at her sides, against the cloth of her *abiya*, her gold wedding band reflecting in the light coming from the banquet hall windows.

“I don’t want you to think that it’s common,” Sarah said, “or expected of you.”

Alika opened her purse and began searching for her keys again. She reached inside until she felt them against the tips of her fingers. They jingled in the quiet of the night as she withdrew them. “Thank you,” she said, looping a finger through the ring of a key chain and silencing the noise by turning up her palm.



“We should get together sometime,” Sarah said. Alika caught the quickness of the offer, as if the words were spoken more to change the subject than to express sincere desire for her company. But Alika wasn’t offended. She understood Sarah’s need for something else to say.

Alika smiled and nodded. “Yes, we should.”

“You still have my number?”

“Yes. It’s in my phonebook.”

“Give me yours.” Sarah laughed. “Only Allah knows where that piece of paper is by now.” She patted her sides, apparently in search of something to write with. “You have a pen?”

“I think so,” Alika said, peering into her handbag again. She pulled out a pen a second later and scribbled her number, again, on a torn sheet of paper. She handed the paper to Sarah.

“Call me,” Sarah said with a smile as she started to return to the building. “Anytime.”

“You do the same.”

“*As-salaamu’alaikum.*”

“*Wa’alaiku-mus-salaam.*”

Alika sighed, walking to the driver’s side door. She slipped her key inside and turned it before pulling at the handle to open the door. She climbed in and shut the door, feeling perspiration beading beneath her clothes in the stuffy car. She turned on the ignition, and caught a glimpse of Sarah before she disappeared into the building.

Alika bit her lower lip as she held the steering wheel, hesitating as the air conditioner blew out warm air that gradually grew cool, and she wondered at her reaction earlier that night, and just moments before. There was so much that she had withheld, and for so many years. And it scared her that, tonight, she had been inclined to share. Sarah had misinterpreted Alika’s discomfort for offense, restlessness in the face of the unknown. But Alika’s uneasiness was due more to the familiarity of the subject than it being bizarre. Years of compelled silence had made her forget that polygamy, *polygyny*, pulsed in her veins.

Alika knew before her mother that there was someone else. In the beginning, Alika thought her and her father’s frequent trips to Nigeria were for her, Alika’s gift, from father to daughter, shared just between the two of them. And, perhaps, initially, they were. Her mother last visited the country when Alika was four, and the memory of that trip would be the one Alika would recall as her first sojourn to a country so colorful, so full of life, so full of *her*. But, of course, it was not her first. Alika had been there at least three times before, with both her mother and father. But this would be the one to leave its indelible mark. It was as if she knew, even as a small child, it would be a time marker, the first on a timeline, or perhaps the last. Either way, there was no “other” family trip after that.

Alika recalled nothing out of the ordinary on the trip itself, but she remembered the shouting, the sounds of things thrashing against the floor and walls as she lay awake, though exhausted, on the night of their return. She knew then in the loneliness and largeness of her room, that they had been holding back in Nigeria, on the plane, and even during the taxi ride home, holding themselves together beneath the restless tension that was all let loose once they crossed the threshold of their suburban Virginia home.

Years later, Alika remembered it only as a terrifying night. She didn't sleep, and at moments she pulled the covers over her head. At others she ran to their door in fear, seeking refuge in the very ones who were the source of her fright. The horrible sounds coming through the wood would make her halt, and a crash would send her bolting back to the soft blankets of her bed. But, of course, there was nothing soft, not even in her comforters and pillows, that night.

Alika looked behind her as she pulled out of the parking lot and then glanced in her rearview mirror as she pulled the car forward after shifting gears. The glow of the banquet hall windows grew smaller in her mirror as she drove, and she knew then, that that's what she wanted of her life. Driving slowly and carefully away from what she would leave behind. She knew at the moment, as the rhythmic ticking of the left turn signal filled the car, that whatever parallels her newfound religion required her to make between it and her mother's life, she vowed she would not allow those parallels to lead her down her mother's path.



## *About the author*

**Umm Zakiyyah** (Rubye Moore) was born in 1975 in Long Island, New York, to formerly Christian parents Clark and Delores Moore. That year her parents accepted Islam after spending years in the Nation of Islam under the late Elijah Muhammad. They later changed their family name from Moore to Siddeeq and chose the names Muhammad and Fareedah for themselves and the name Baiyinah for Umm Zakiyyah.

Umm Zakiyyah spent most of her childhood in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she wrote articles for local newspapers and essays and poetry for college publications nationwide. In college, as a student at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, she wrote articles for the school's newspaper and received various awards for her leadership and academic achievements. In 1997, she graduated from Emory University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education.

Umm Zakiyyah is the recipient of the 2008 Muslim Girls Unity Conference Distinguished Authors Award. She is currently an American education consultant in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

To find out more about the author, visit her website at: **[themuslimauthor.com](http://themuslimauthor.com)** or join her Facebook page.

## Other Titles in this Trilogy

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.



