

From the internationally acclaimed author of the  
*If I Should Speak* trilogy

# MUSLIM GIRL

a novel

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UMM ZAKIYYAH

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AL-WALAA  
PUBLICATIONS

# MUSLIM GIRL

a novel by Umm Zakiyyah

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## DEDICATION

*For those who are making peace with who they are—  
and embracing, ever so furtively,  
who they can become*

*I don't know how this journey will end.  
I don't even know fully where I stand.  
I know only that I have faith. And for me,  
that's all that matters now.*

—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah

## PROLOGUE

*When my mother became Muslim, I didn't even know what a Muslim was. I mean, what does a nine-year-old know about religion?*

*I remember when she first told me. I was tucking the Ebony magazine under my pillow so that my parents wouldn't know I was reading it. I looked up and saw my mother standing near my bedroom door. Her arms were folded, and she was frowning, looking all upset. I thought she was angry with me for reading "grown-up stuff," but she just sat on the edge of my bed and smiled at me.*

*"Naya, I'm Muslim now." Her eyes seemed sad for some reason.*

*"What?"*

*"I'm Muslim." Her smile seemed childlike, like she was waiting for my approval.*

*I averted my gaze and pulled the covers up to my shoulders as I settled under them. "Okay." I had no idea what she was talking about, but since I was pretty sure I wasn't in trouble, I just wanted to go to sleep.*

*My mother stood and patted my head. "Thanks, Naya." She turned off the light and closed the door as she left. I lay awake in the darkness for several minutes before finally shutting my eyes and drifting to sleep.*

*"Children are resilient." That's what my father used to say. Maybe that's why I jumped head-on into Islam myself and even learned Arabic and Qur'an and thought it was "cool" to live in Saudi Arabia.*

*Oh my God.*

*Did I really think that?*

## The Move

“Well, it’s definitely not what we had in mind when we moved here,” Veronica said, the cordless phone between her shoulder and ear as she kneeled down to pick up a stack of books from the floor. She wiped a hand on her jeans before standing and shuffling through the old paperbacks. “At this point, we have no idea where he’s going to find work in Maryland. All we know is we can’t live here anymore.” She grunted, wrinkling her nose as she tossed a wilted, coverless book to the pile on the floor. “At least if we plan to stay married.”

Inaya stood on the opposite side of the living room, hands on her hips as she surveyed the clutter. Dust soiled the faded white T-shirt that she wore, and the worn threads in the right knee of her jeans exposed brown skin in need of lotion.

Inaya bit her lower lip as she looked at the piles of glass plates, bowls, and cups. She glanced uncertainly at her mother, who was leaning over a box and arranging some books inside. The faded black handkerchief knotted at the back of Veronica’s head exposed an array of short twists that were fraying at the ends.

“That’s what we thought too,” Veronica said, amusement in her tone. “You’d expect a bit more from a Muslim country, huh? But they just couldn’t get over the idea of an Arab guy marrying a black woman.”

“Mom?” Inaya knew it was better to wait till her mother finished talking before asking about the dishes, but her stepfather had said he wanted everything packed by the time he returned from work.

Veronica brought a hand to her mouth to stifle laughter, a clear sign she hadn’t heard Inaya speaking to her. “Girl,

you're a trip," Veronica said, shaking her head. "I threw away most of my old pictures. But to tell you the truth, Sa'ad wanted to keep the ones from graduate school."

"Mom?" Inaya's raised voice was on the verge of a whine.

"Hold on a second." Veronica covered the mouthpiece with one hand and turned toward Inaya.

"What is it?"

"What should I do with the dishes?"

"Pack them. What else?"

"But they're glass. Won't they break?"

"Get some old newspaper and wrap them."

Inaya's eyes widened. "Each one?"

Veronica drew her eyebrows together in annoyance. "Yes. Each one. Now, hurry up before Sa'ad gets home."

"But..."

Veronica was already turned back around and engaged in conversation before Inaya could protest further.

"Girl, you know I gave up modeling after I became Muslim," Veronica said, her grin visible as Inaya sighed and went to retrieve an empty box. "That was the first thing Sa'ad told me after he asked to marry me." She laughed. "But he said there's no harm in keeping a few pictures."

Inaya groaned as she dropped the empty box on the floor next to the dishes then dragged herself to the kitchen to find old newspapers.

A faint cry came from a back room as Inaya crouched in front of a cabinet near the sink. She pulled a stack of aged *Arab News* and *Saudi Gazette* papers from the bottom shelf and set them on the floor.

"Inaya," Veronica called from the living room, "can you bring me the baby?"

Sighing, Inaya pushed herself to a standing position, then reached over the sink and held one palm up as she pressed the soap dispenser with the other. She rubbed her palms



together to distribute the white cream over both hands before turning on the tap and letting the water run over her hands. She would have to find a clean shirt to change into too. Her mother was very particular about never handling a newborn with soiled clothing and dirty hands.

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“Surprise!”

Inaya’s eyes widened as she surveyed the large room that was filled with dozens of girls she had met during the seven years she had lived in Riyadh. Amongst them were Saudi girls she had tutored in English or met at school, as well as expats from India, Pakistan, America, and the United Kingdom whom she had befriended or met during an Arabic or Qur’an class.

Inaya laughed and glanced behind her at her mother, and Veronica grinned back at Inaya, the baby against Veronica’s chest from where she stood in the doorway of the small house. The rest of the women, mothers of most of the girls, relaxed outside on blankets spread out on grass patches atop the dirt and sand. The expansive land was enclosed by a tall stone wall that afforded the women maximum privacy when they removed their abayas and veils.

“You have fun,” Veronica said, squeezing Inaya’s arm gently, one arm cradling the baby. “I’m outside if you need me.”

Inaya nodded as her mother released her arm and turned the door handle to go outside. Inaya was yanked into the crowd by one of her friends before she could respond.

“Were you surprised?” Rafa said, looping her arm through Inaya’s and guiding Inaya across the room. Rafa’s dark eyes sparkled as she looked eagerly at Inaya.

Inaya laughed. “I had no idea. My mom just said we should take a break from packing.”

The other girls squealed in laughter, clapping their hands together. “Your mom is so cool, *maashaAllah*,” Rafa said, grinning.

“Did she help plan this?” Inaya’s eyes widened more as she looked at her friends.

Rafa nodded. “It was her idea.”

“No way...”

“We wanted to do something for you before you left,” Rafa said. “So we asked her opinion.”

“My mom is a trip.” Inaya smiled knowingly as she unhooked her arm from Rafa’s. Inaya lifted her chin slightly as she unfastened the pin of her *khimaar*. She pulled at the black chiffon cloth, exposing the mass of braids that framed her face. “She had me thinking we were going to be cleaning the house all night.”

The rhythmic sound of a drum came from a far corner of the room, and Inaya turned to see two of her Saudi friends beating a small drum and nodding their heads to the rhythm.

“*Yaa ukhtunaa*,” they sang in harmony, “*nuhibbuki fillaah. Yaa ukhutunaa, hafidhakillaah...*” *O our sister, we love you for the sake of Allah. O our sister, may you be under the protection of Allah...*

Rafa grabbed Inaya’s hands and began to dance playfully. The other girls laughed and jumped to their feet and joined in as the Saudi girls continued to play the *daff* and sing.

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“The first thing I want to say, Inaya, is that you’re an inspiration to all of us, *maashaAllah*.” The Saudi girls who had been singing and playing the drum now stood in front of the room as the other girls sat on the Arab-style floor couch that lined the room’s walls, looking at the sisters as the elder

one spoke. Tears glistened in Batool's eyes as she gazed at Inaya.

"I'm really sad to see you go," Batool said, "*Wallah*, before I met you, I took the Qur'an for granted. And I took Arabic for granted too. But seeing you memorize the whole Qur'an and push everyone to learn Arabic, *subhaanAllah*, it made me realize how important Qur'an and *Fus-ha* should be in our lives."

Batool's younger sister nodded her head, her expression thoughtful.

"I remember when I first met you," Batool said, smiling sadly, "and I asked why you want to learn Arabic when you already have the best language in the world."

Inaya smiled at the memory, bowing her head from where she sat next to Rafa on the floor couch, a half-eaten plate of food on the carpet by her feet.

"And you said, 'No, *you* have the best language in the world. What can be better than the language of Qur'an?'"

Batool shook her head as she drew in a deep breath. "*Wallah*, hearing you say that made me so ashamed, and after that I started memorizing Qur'an myself."

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*We have no idea what we're going to do without you,  
"The girl who gets things done."  
But I suppose we'll have to figure out a way to still learn,  
Do things right, and have some fun!  
Thanks for teaching us the meaning of friendship  
And love for Allah's sake.  
Thanks for telling us to pray and cover—  
Without taking a break!  
Thanks for teaching us that Islam is a religion of action,  
Not a religion of words.  
Thanks for reminding us that saying*

*No! to Allah (about anything) is absurd.  
We're going to miss you, Inaya,  
Our beloved sister, "cousin", and friend.  
But like you always say, "Keep the faith, girl,  
And, insha'Allah, we'll meet in the End."*

Inaya smiled as she sat on the edge of her bed late that night, re-reading the poem the girls had written and given to her.

"Are you nervous about going back to America?" Rafa had asked her.

Inaya had laughed. "Honestly, I can't wait."

"Really?" Her friend seemed genuinely surprised.

"I'm going to miss everyone," Inaya said. "But I look forward to having a normal life again."

Inaya folded the paper and stuffed it back into the envelope before setting it on top of her other cards and gifts next to her bed. She stood and reached across the pile to press the light switch by the door. The room went black, and Inaya felt a lump in her throat.

"Are you going to come back to visit?" Rafa had asked as she helped Inaya put the gifts in the back of the car.

"My mom says we'll probably never come back," Inaya said as she pushed some boxes to the side to make room for others.

When Inaya turned to take a bag from Rafa, she saw Rafa's eyes widen through the slit of the black veil. "Never?"

Inaya shook her head. "She said we did Hajj and 'Umrah, and that's enough."

"But what about Brother Sa'ad? He won't visit his family?"

Inaya shrugged. "A lot of his family live in Virginia, so I'm not sure."

"But..."

Inaya waved her hand. "I guess he can come by himself if he wants."

"No way... You won't come too?"

Inaya was silent momentarily. "I'm not sure I want to."

Rafa averted her gaze and was quiet as she helped Inaya arrange the last of the gifts in the trunk. The embrace she gave Inaya minutes later was devoid of its normal emotion, and Inaya sensed something she had said cut her friend deep.

Inaya pulled the bedcovers over herself and recited *Ayatul-Kursi* in the dark. She shut her eyes and tried to concentrate on the verses of Qur'an, but Inaya could still see Rafa's sad eyes avoiding hers.

A second later Inaya thought of her father and friends in America, and Inaya's heart swelled in anticipation for her flight back home next week.

## America

“Too many rules,” Anthony said in response to his younger sister, who stood next to him on the balcony of the suburban Maryland home that their parents owned. He tapped his cigarette lightly against the wooden railing before bringing it to his mouth.

“Then don’t follow the rules,” Veronica said. “That’s better than never becoming Muslim.”

Anthony’s gaze was thoughtful as he exhaled a train of smoke. “That’s new.”

“What’s new?” Veronica turned to her brother, her eyebrows drawn together.

“Making compromises.” He frowned momentarily. “It was always all or nothing with you.”

She creased her forehead. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. You always come here preaching like God asked us to be angels or else we’ll burn in Hell.”

Veronica drew in a deep breath as her gaze rested on the grass and trees aligning the fence of the backyard. How could she respond to something like that? Sometimes she felt it didn’t matter what she said or did. She would be viewed negatively as long as she was Muslim.

“And according to you,” Anthony said, “God makes the rules, so we have no choice but to follow them.”

Veronica sighed. “We always have a choice, Tony. There are just consequences for what we choose.”

“Then why are you telling me to break rules?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I meant it’s better to be a sinful Muslim than to not be Muslim at all.”

Anthony was silent as he squinted his eyes and smoked.

“Look, Tony,” Veronica said, “Muslims aren’t angels. Nobody’s able to follow the rules perfectly.”

Anthony grunted, a smug grin on his face. “You seem to be doing a pretty good job.”

“Oh please.” Veronica waved her hand. “I’m far from perfect.”

“You don’t act like it.”

“Why? Because I speak up when something’s wrong?”

“You make people uncomfortable,” Anthony said after a thoughtful pause. “You need to realize that.”

Veronica was quiet momentarily. “I realize Islam isn’t the most comfortable subject.”

Anthony leaned on the railing, the cigarette dangling between two fingers. “What happened with you and Chris?”

At the mention of her ex-husband, Veronica’s heart constricted. Chris had been her high school sweetheart, and in the innocence of youth, they had vowed to always be together. Chris had proposed to Veronica the day of their high school graduation, and, teary-eyed, she’d accepted.

Veronica sighed. “Tony, you already know the answer to that.”

Anthony looked at his sister. “You really hurt him, you know that?”

Veronica looked away from her brother. “It wasn’t easy for me either.”

Anthony brought the cigarette to his mouth then blew out a cloud of smoke. He tapped the cigarette on the railing as he stood upright. “Chris started studying religion after you left.”

Veronica drew in a deep breath, uncomfortable with the conversation, but she didn’t know what to say.

Anthony chuckled to himself. “And he came across something that really got to him.”

Anthony was quiet for several seconds as he smoked.

“What?” Veronica said quietly, glancing at her brother.

“It was about a man who wanted to marry a woman,” Anthony said, prompting Veronica to look away. “And she said no because she was Muslim and he was a pagan.”

There was a long pause.

“But she finally agreed to marry him.”

Veronica’s eyes widened, unable to hide her shock as she looked at Anthony. “Really?”

“And she didn’t want money or a ring or anything,” Anthony said, a slight smile on his face, but it was clear his thoughts were elsewhere. “She just asked him for one thing.”

Veronica narrowed her eyes as the story began to sound vaguely familiar. She recalled reading a similar story in Arabian history. “What’s that?”

“That he become Muslim so they could be together.”

Veronica’s heart grew heavy and she averted her gaze. Yes, she knew the story after all. It was the famous story of Abu Talha and Umm Sulaim.

Anthony and Veronica were quiet for some time.

“But what about Inaya?” Anthony said, looking at his sister, concern in his eyes.

Veronica furrowed her brows as she looked at her brother. “What do you mean?”

“How does she feel about all this?”

Veronica felt herself growing defensive. “All of what?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Anthony shook his head. “You walk around as if everything you do is right for everyone else. I just hope you don’t lose your daughter in the process.”

Veronica glared at her brother. She started to respond, but Anthony spoke before she could.

“I swear, every time I see that girl, I feel sorry for her. She has no identity.”

“She’s Muslim, Tony. That’s identity enough.”

“For *you*,” he said. “Don’t forget, she didn’t choose Islam. You did.”



“She loves being Muslim, Tony. In many ways, she’s stronger than I am.”

“I don’t doubt that, Ronnie. I just wonder if it’s only because she wants to make you happy.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “I think you just have a hard time understanding how a sixteen-year-old can be stronger than you.”

Anthony coughed laughter. “Most youth are stronger than people my age, if you ask me. Once you hit forty, you aren’t trying to change your lifestyle, even if it’s the right thing to do.”

He tapped his cigarette against the railing again. “But this has nothing to do with me. I was just hoping you’d be more concerned about Inaya than your pride.”

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“Eww...” Inaya wrinkled her nose as she read the label of the container her cousin had just handed her. “Margarine? Are you trying to kill us? Where’s the butter?”

“What’s wrong with margarine?” Kayla said as she took the container from Inaya and carried it back to the refrigerator.

“Are you kidding?” Inaya laughed. “It’s not even a food substance.”

Kayla groaned as she opened the refrigerator and put the margarine back inside. “Is this something else Muslims can’t eat?”

Inaya rolled her eyes. “No. It’s something humans can’t eat, you included.”

“I didn’t know you guys were health nuts.”

“We’re not. I just want to live past forty.”

“My dad is forty-four, and he eats margarine all the time.”

“Kayla,” Inaya said, sighing, “can you just pass me the butter? I’m craving chocolate chip cookies, and I want to be done before my mom announces we have to leave.”

Kayla shut the refrigerator then set four sticks of butter on the kitchen table next to Inaya. “Can I help with anything?”

“You can crack the eggs.”

“Is this some secret family recipe or something? Why can’t I mix the batter?”

“If it was a secret, I wouldn’t let you watch.”

Inaya removed the foil wrapping from a stick of butter then set it on a glass plate before doing the same with the other sticks. “We’ll have to microwave these for about twenty seconds. They need to be soft.”

“The margarine was already soft,” Kayla said, a half grin on her face as she carried the plate to the microwave. “We’d be halfway done if you weren’t so picky.”

“Things that are bad for you are always easier,” Inaya said, flashing a smile. “It’s better to be picky than sick.”

The humming buzz of the microwave filled the silence between them.

“Is that why you guys are Muslim?” Kayla glanced hesitantly at her cousin. “You think being Christian was bad for us?”

Inaya creased her forehead as she looked at Kayla. “What? I’m talking about food, Kayla, not religion.”

“I know. I’m just—” A beeping sound prompted Kayla to turn around and open the microwave. “I’m just wondering if that’s why you guys left the church.”

Inaya sighed as her cousin set the plate of butter in front of her. “I think it’s more complicated than that, Kayla. My mom didn’t just wake up and decide Christianity is bad for us.”

“That’s how it seems to us,” Kayla said as she sat on a high stool and reached for the carton of eggs.

Inaya was silent as she used a rubber spatula to scrape the soft butter into the large mixing bowl. “You and I were only nine when my mom became Muslim.”

“But don’t you remember church?” Kayla smiled, lost in a pleasant memory. “We used to sit in the pew and pass notes during the service.”

Inaya laughed beside herself. “Yeah, and then my mom would pinch me so hard I felt like screaming.”

“Oh my God.” Kayla shook her head. “Those sermons were so boring.”

“I just went for the songs.”

Kayla chuckled. “Girl, you went because your mom made you.”

“Yeah,” Inaya agreed, laughter in her voice. “Just like you.”

“You don’t miss church?” Kayla raised her voice over the sound of the electric mixer. She tapped the side of an egg on the small mixing bowl in front of her before pulling the shell open and emptying the whites and yolk inside the bowl.

Inaya shrugged as she steered the mixer around the bowl. “Not really. I mean, for me, there wasn’t much to miss. I was too young to really care either way.”

“I can’t imagine my mom becoming Muslim. I think I’d freak out.”

Inaya wore a smirk as she lifted her gaze to her cousin before looking at the mixture again. “Why?”

“I can’t imagine giving up everything I love.”

“Oh please, Kayla. It’s not like that.”

“Well, to me it is.”

“How do you know? You’ve never been Muslim.”

“I see Aunt Ronnie and you. It’s like being a nun, except worse.”

Inaya’s eyes widened playfully. “Worse? You make it sound like religion is a punishment.”

“Maybe it is.”

Inaya glared at Kayla, but Inaya's pleasant expression remained.

"I sort of like the idea that Jesus died for my sins," Kayla said.

"But he didn't." Inaya turned off the electric mixer and set it on the table.

Kayla handed her the bowl of eggs. "Yeah, I know."

Taken aback, Inaya creased her forehead as she met Kayla's gaze. "And you still believe it?"

Kayla shrugged. "No, but I want to."

Inaya regarded her cousin skeptically. "Don't you think that's kind of hypocritical?"

"My dad says we're all hypocrites."

Inaya grunted laughter as she emptied the bowl of eggs into the butter-sugar mixture. "I don't think so."

"Well, maybe not you and Aunt Ronnie, but—"

"And what would make us the exception?" Inaya turned on the electric mixer and glanced curiously at Kayla as she maneuvered the mixer around the bowl.

"You're living what you believe," Kayla said, raising her voice again over the mixer.

"I thought your family believed all that stuff from church."

"We used to."

"Wait." Inaya drew her eyebrows together as she looked at her cousin. "You're saying the whole family doesn't even believe in Christianity?"

Kayla contorted her face. "Girl, I'm just talking about me and my parents."

"Aunt Sharon and Uncle Tony aren't Christian anymore?"

"Well, maybe my mom is," Kayla said thoughtfully. "But my dad doesn't go to church much these days."

"Why?"

Kayla shrugged. “He doesn’t really talk about it. But Uncle Chris says it’s because he’s going through a spiritual crisis.”

At the mention of her father, Inaya grew silent. She hadn’t seen him since she arrived to America three weeks ago. They spoke briefly on the phone the day she arrived, but her mother hadn’t had time to arrange a visit—at least that’s what she said.

“And how does my dad know what Uncle Tony is going through?” Inaya’s voice was devoid of the energy of seconds before, but she hoped her cousin didn’t notice.

“They hang out a lot.” Kayla chuckled. “Uncle Chris even took him to an open house at a mosque.”

Inaya’s eyes widened at she looked at Kayla. “What?”

Kayla creased her forehead as she met Inaya’s gaze. “You didn’t know your dad is thinking about converting?”

Inaya halted her motions and turned off the mixer. She set it on the table as she stared at Kayla in disbelief. “What?”

Kayla shrugged. “Maybe I misunderstood. But that’s what my dad said.”

Uncertain what to say, Inaya walked over to the counter and opened a cabinet. Her thoughts were distant as her eyes scanned the shelves.

*“Because he wasn’t Muslim, sweetheart.”* It was her mother’s constant response to why she divorced Inaya’s father. *“So it just couldn’t work.”*

Inaya’s heart raced with hope. *What if...?* Inaya thought of her stepfather and her baby brother Abdullah, and she immediately felt ashamed of herself.

It could never happen, she thought sadly.

“The flour’s on the table,” Kayla said, humor in her tone.

Inaya started as she turned to Kayla. She had momentarily forgotten her cousin was in the kitchen.

“Oh yeah,” Inaya said, an awkward smile on her face as she closed the cabinets and walked back to the table.

“You think he’ll convert?” Kayla was looking curiously at Inaya.

Inaya contorted her face as she opened the bag of flour. “I don’t know. He never mentioned it to me.”

“I know, but...” Kayla’s gaze grew distant. “But do you think he’d do it, you know?”

Inaya shrugged, her deflated hope making it difficult to pay full attention to her cousin. “If he wants to.”

“But what about Dana?”

“What about her?” Inaya’s tone was sarcastic. She didn’t want to talk about her father’s girlfriend. Inaya hated the way the woman always tried to be so sweet and polite whenever she talked to Inaya. But Inaya sensed Dana looked down on her and her mother because they were Muslim.

“Are you kidding?” Kayla said, laughter in her tone. “Dana is practically married to the church.”

“And?” Inaya said, rolling her eyes. “My dad doesn’t owe her anything. He can find someone else.”

“After being together for four years?” Kayla chuckled. “Come on, Inaya. She’s already talking about them getting married.”

Inaya halted dipping a measuring cup into the flour as she regarded Kayla. “Did my dad say that?”

“No, I don’t think so, but—”

“Then he can find someone else.” Inaya resumed measuring out the flour and dumping it into the cookie batter.

In the silence that followed, Inaya felt Kayla studying her curiously.

“Yeah,” Kayla said finally, but Inaya could hear the insincerity in her cousin’s voice. “Maybe he can.”

## A New School

It was a Monday morning in early September when Inaya followed Sa'ad and Veronica as they entered the glass double doors of the public school that Inaya would attend. Heart hammering in excitement, Inaya stared in awe at the massive main staircase and the ceiling-to-floor glass pillars displaying academic and athletic trophies, plaques, and medals. She slowed her steps to study the smiling faces in some of the framed pictures next to the awards.

"You can wait out here if you want," Veronica said, prompting Inaya to turn toward her mother, who was holding open the door to the front office across the hall. "We'll let you know if we need you."

"Okay." Inaya nodded as Veronica followed Sa'ad into the office, the door closing behind them.

Inaya walked slowly along the pillars, pausing to study the inscriptions on each award. *2<sup>nd</sup> Place National Varsity Cheerleading Competition. 1<sup>st</sup> Place Regional Spelling Bee Champions. Who's Who Among American High School Scholars. Distinguished Student Award, 2008. National Scholars Award, 2010. Award for Academic Excellence, 2009. Future Hope Scholars, 2011.*

"May I help you?"

Inaya started and found herself opposite a young man wearing a polite smile, his hands clasped near his waist.

Inaya didn't know what to say so she just stared at him.

"Are you a student here?" he asked, the polite smile still on his face. Inaya sensed that he thought she was violating a rule of some kind.

It was then that Inaya saw the badge attached to the left side of his dress shirt. "Student Ambassador."

His kind mannerisms and the walnut brown of his face held a vague sense of familiarity, but Inaya couldn't explain this feeling.

"If so, you need a hall pass during class times."

Inaya shook her head. "I'm not a student," she said finally. "My parents are in the office registering me for school."

His eyebrows rose in understanding. "Yes, of course." There was an awkward pause, as neither knew what to say.

"If you would like to take a look around," he said, "feel free. But you'll need a visitor's pass and a chaperone."

Inaya lifted her eyebrows. "A chaperone?"

He laughed lightly. "I know it sounds like a first date, but it's our school policy for visitors."

Inaya's cheeks grew warm, and she averted her gaze. "I'm sorry... I didn't know. I just..."

"No problem," he said, holding up a hand. "Just wait here for a moment."

Before Inaya could respond, he disappeared into an unlabeled door near the front office. He reappeared less than a minute later and handed her a badge similar to the one he was wearing. She hesitated momentarily then accepted it. "VISITOR" it said in all-red capital letters.

"Just pin it to your dress, and no one should bother you."

"Thanks..."

There was an awkward silence as she struggled with the safety pin affixed to the back of the plastic. When she was finally able to close the pin, the badge hung lopsided.

"Where are you from?"

Inaya heard the question as she frowned at the visitor badge. "I'm sorry?" Inaya said, as she glanced up at the student.

"You have an interesting accent," he said, his dark eyes kind as he looked at her. "I was just wondering where you're from."



Inaya's eyes widened slightly. "I do?"

The ambassador laughed heartily, and the long dimples in his cheeks made Inaya realize why he seemed familiar to her. He resembled the singer Usher, whose public divorce and court case she and her friends had followed in the internet news in Saudi Arabia.

"I'm sorry," he said, and it was then that Inaya realized his laugh was from embarrassment. "I didn't mean it offensively. It's just... Well, I thought you sounded Arab."

Inaya creased her forehead, unable to hide her amused expression. "Arab?"

His smile faded, but he tried to appear diplomatic. "I'm not good at judging ethnicities. It was just a wild guess."

"I'm American," Inaya said, unable to keep from chuckling. "But I suppose it makes sense." She shrugged. "My family just came back from Saudi Arabia."

"Cool." His wide smile returned. "Do you speak Arabic?"

Inaya nodded. "A bit."

"Maybe that's where the accent comes from."

Inaya was silent, unsure how she felt about having an Arab accent. She would have to be more careful when she spoke.

An awkward silence followed.

"Do you want to take a look around the school?" the student ambassador asked.

Inaya grinned. "I thought I needed a chaperone for that," she said, surprised by how comfortable she felt with him.

A smile spread on his face. "I could be your chaperone."

Inaya felt wary all of a sudden, but she maintained a pleasant expression.

"As a student ambassador," he added quickly, as if sensing her apprehension.

She glanced uncertainly at the door to the main office.

"We'll stay on this floor," he said.

“Okay...” she said reluctantly. “As long as we don’t go far.”

“No problem,” he said with a smile. “It’ll only take a minute.”

Inaya bit her lower lip as a hesitant smile formed on her face. “That would be great. Thanks.”

“Forgive me.” He smiled and stuck out his hand. “I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Raymond.”

It took a moment for Inaya to realize that he was waiting for her to shake his hand. Her cheeks grew warm, and her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

“I’m Inaya,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She tucked her hands deep into the pockets of her *jilbaab* and smiled widely at him.

Raymond’s face registered confusion then embarrassment. He pulled his hand away. “I’m sorry. I forgot that you don’t—”

“It’s okay.” Inaya felt so stupid. He probably thought she was an idiot.

Raymond appeared flustered, but a hesitant grin formed on his face as he started down the hall. “I guess I’m not the best chaperone, huh?”

Inaya was unsure how to respond, so she just fell in step next to him.

“This hall leads to the auditorium,” he said as they rounded the corner. “That’s where the ambassadors have their orientation.”

There was an awkward silence, and Inaya glanced sideways at him.

“But I guess I didn’t listen well to the instructions,” he said with a smile, and Inaya sensed he was making a joke.

“Multicultural sensitivity training,” he said, still smiling. “That’s where the ambassadors learned about different cultures.” He chuckled. “I forgot about the *Wahhabi* sect.”

His tone was apologetic. “We don’t have a lot of fundamentalists at the school.”

Inaya winced and her cheeks burned in offense. She was so upset that she couldn’t look at him.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” she murmured, her heart pounding in nervous anger. “But I’m not a fundamentalist.”

Raymond knitted his eyebrows in confusion. “I’m sorry. I just assumed...”

“You shouldn’t assume.” Inaya’s voice was tight.

Raymond remained silent, and Inaya sensed he had no idea what he’d done wrong.

Inaya was suddenly self-conscious of the black *khimaar* that framed her face and the wide black over-garment that she was sure looked like a stupid oversized dress.

A classroom door opened in front of them and they halted their steps as a girl and boy emerged holding hands. The girl was leaning her head on the boy’s shoulder, but when her eyes met Inaya’s, the girl lifted her head and wrinkled her nose.

“What the hell is that?” the girl said in a harsh whisper. The boy responded only by contorting his face as he neared Inaya.

“Do you have a pass?” Raymond said, his voice loud and authoritative.

Inaya sensed the ambassador wanted her to know he didn’t agree with the student’s snide remark. But she was only slightly appeased. She wanted to shrink through the floor right then.

The girl’s nose flared in irritation as she flashed a yellow slip of paper in front of Raymond then rolled her eyes in exaggerated annoyance.

“If you want to keep the school safe,” the boy said, a look of disgust on his face as he glanced at Inaya, pulling his

girlfriend closer to him, “then worry about that terrorist you’re escorting.”

The girl snickered.

“You wouldn’t want to be party to killing innocent students.”

Inaya’s eyes widened in shock and embarrassment, but the boy and girl had already turned away.

Raymond stood still, his eyes fiery as he stared after them, their laughter still audible as they disappeared down the hall.

“Idiots,” he muttered to himself.

His lips formed a thin line as he looked at Inaya. “I’m sorry about that,” he said with a sigh. “Unfortunately, only the student ambassadors went through multicultural sensitivity training.”

Inaya huffed as she walked away from the ambassador toward the hall leading to the front office. *And I’m still a fundamentalist to you.*

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Still shaken, Inaya was silent as she rode in the back of the car after her parents finished the registration process. Her face was warm in shame and upset. She sunk low into her seat until the car was far from the school. She couldn’t shake the feeling of shame she felt right then. Even her mother and stepfather looked like extremists.

A wave of embarrassment passed through Inaya as she wondered what Raymond must think of her. *Ugh*. Why did he have to be standing in the hall when her parents walked out of the office?

She couldn’t imagine what Raymond thought of her stepfather’s obvious Arab appearance and large beard—and her mother’s all-black Saudi-style abaya and face veil.

*“But I’m not a fundamentalist.”*

Oh really?

That was probably the question Raymond had been too polite to ask.

And so what? Inaya thought to herself. She couldn't care less what that stupid so-called student ambassador thought of her.

Multicultural sensitivity? Yeah right. Raymond's charade of kindness was only because he was on hall duty. He probably wouldn't want to be seen talking to the Arab-sounding girl outside of that.

Inaya felt sick as the sound of Arabic came from the car speakers. She rolled her eyes. A "fundamentalist lecture." That's probably what Raymond would think of this Arab sheikh's guttural exhortations.

*"Cool. Do you speak Arabic?"*

A knot loosened in her chest at the memory, but Inaya didn't trust the softness she felt toward Raymond right then. After all, he wasn't on her side.

*"Then worry about that terrorist you're escorting."*

Inaya's head throbbed, and she slumped in her seat.

*"I look forward to having a normal life again."*

What? Had Inaya really said that to her friends?

Right then, Inaya had no idea what "normal" even meant...and it frustrated her that, as a Muslim girl, she'd be denied any opportunity to learn.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daughter of American converts to Islam, Umm Zakiyyah, also known by her birth name Ruby Moore, is the award-winning author of the *If I Should Speak* trilogy and the novels *Realities of Submission* and *Hearts We Lost*. *Muslim Girl* is her second juvenile fiction story after *A Friendship Promise*.

Umm Zakiyyah's books have been used in schools and universities in America and abroad for multicultural and religious studies. She writes about the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians, and the intercultural, spiritual, and moral struggles of Muslims in America.

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