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His Other Wife

a novel

UMM
ZAKIYYAH



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Other
Wife**

By Umm Zakiyyah

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For the struggling men and women. You know who you are.

*“Marriage is not the end of the rainbow, and divorce is not
the end of the world.”*

—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah

1

His Other Wife

In the foyer of her apartment, Aliyah tilted her head to the side and unfastened the decorative hijab pin that secured the plum chiffon fabric in place. As the *khimaar* loosened itself from her head, she exhaled and kicked off her flats, relieved to be home. She set the scarf pin on the front table next to her cell phone then casually tapped her forefinger on the mobile screen to log in to her voicemail.

Aliyah frowned in disappointment as she realized that the single message that had been left on her phone while she was at work all day was from her uncle. Disinterested, she put the voicemail on speakerphone as she pulled the loosened cloth from her head then ran a palm over the braids plaited to her scalp in cornrows. Holding her *khimaar*, she scooped up the phone with her free hand and headed to the couch as her uncle's eager voice projected from the mobile.

"...So give me a call, Aliyah. I think this may be the one." Aliyah rolled her eyes as she let the chiffon cloth fall to the floor table in front of the couch then stabbed at her phone to delete the message before pressing the red icon to end the call.

She appreciated her uncle's enthusiasm in fulfilling his role as her marriage guardian, but she wasn't ready to get married. Her uncle had converted to Islam when she was in high school and had been influential in her own decision to become Muslim, and for that, she would always be grateful. Her parents practically disowned her after she left the church, and Benjamin was the closest thing to a father she'd had since accepting Islam in college. But for the past eight months Aliyah was becoming increasingly annoyed with her uncle.

But Aliyah couldn't ask her uncle to stop looking for a husband for her. Benjamin was wrestling a guilty conscience more than he was feeding his enthusiasm as her *wali*. It wasn't his fault that Aliyah was divorced. She wished he could understand that. If there was anyone to blame for her marriage falling apart, it was Aliyah herself. She was the one who'd eagerly introduced Matthew to her uncle and begged him to support the marriage. She'd foolishly believed that if she did everything right, everything would turn out all right.

Matthew was one of the good guys, Aliyah couldn't deny that. But she should have been less naïve about the nuances of the spiritual growth of a new Muslim. Matthew had been Muslim only a year when they'd met, and Aliyah had been Muslim for eight. It wasn't until they were living together as husband and wife that the seven years between their Islamic experiences felt like light years.

Aliyah tossed her cell phone on a sofa cushion then collapsed onto the couch herself. She leaned her head back in exhaustion and stared at the ceiling of her apartment. *I need a new job*, she thought to herself. She liked teaching algebra and computer science at the local college, but the money simply was not enough.

She fought a tinge of guilt as she recalled being penniless and jobless and begging God to send her any form of provision. In the end, it was her best friend, Deanna, who came through for her by asking her husband to put in a good word for Aliyah at the college where he worked. Aliyah was ecstatic when she was notified that she was hired for the position. It had been hard to believe she was a bona fide college professor now. And it didn't hurt that the masjid was only a five-minute drive from the campus, so she was able to relax in the women's prayer area during her lunch break and planning periods if she didn't have any student appointments.

The shrilling of the home phone sent Aliyah's heart racing, and she sat up quickly and opened her eyes. Aliyah hadn't realized she had fallen asleep. The house was dark except for a glow of light coming from the kitchen. The phone shrilled again, and Aliyah groaned as she pushed herself off the couch and walked over to where the cordless sat on a wall table near the front door.

"Hello?"

"Girl, open the door."

Aliyah hung up without replying, and true to character, Deanna was pounding on the front door before Aliyah could even unbolt it and pull it open.

"Are you deaf?" Deanna said as she stepped into the foyer carrying a half-full paper grocery bag. "I've been standing outside that door for at least ten minutes."

Deanna must have come from one of her workshops, Aliyah guessed based on the tailored crimson pantsuit and matching stilettos that she wore. Deanna's flushed cheeks suggested agitation that had been incited by something other than Aliyah, but Aliyah knew Deanna wouldn't mention whatever it was. Deanna's façade of strength was impenetrable.

"I'm sorry, Deeja," Aliyah said as she closed the door and locked it. "I was knocked out."

Deanna rolled her eyes as she handed the paper bag to Aliyah then readjusted the straps of her designer handbag on her shoulder. "Put the ice cream in the freezer before it melts, and you might want to heat up the gyros in the microwave."

Aliyah's eyes widened, and a smile spread across her face as she peered into the bag. "You brought gyros?"

"Yes, against my better judgment," Deanna said as she kicked off her heels. "You know that bread has too many carbs."

"I love you, Deeja!" Aliyah sang out as she made her way to the kitchen and Deanna invited herself into the living room.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Where's the remote?"

"It's probably on the couch somewhere," Aliyah called out from the kitchen. A minute later she returned to the living room with the gyros on a glass serving plate, a stack of paper napkins next to them.

“I saw his other wife,” Deanna said as she stretched out her legs and flexed each foot from where she sat on the couch.

Aliyah felt nauseated as she set the plate on the floor table in front of Deanna then pushed aside the *khimaar* that was lying there. “How do you know it was her?”

Deanna pointed the remote toward the television to turn down the volume. “It was her.” She set down the remote then reached for a gyro. “She was with Matt,” she said as she folded her legs under her as she often did to get comfortable.

“May Allah bless their marriage,” Aliyah muttered as she lifted a gyro from the plate then sat down next to Deanna on the couch.

Deanna’s hand froze inches from her mouth as she glared at Aliyah. “No, Ally. That is not the correct response to this news.”

“Deanna Janice Bivens,” Aliyah said, purposefully using the authoritative tone that Deanna’s mother often used when she referred to Deanna by her full name, “yes it is the correct response. Now let’s eat.”

“You know what your problem is?” Deanna said thoughtfully, setting down her gyro. “You’re too nice. That’s why people run all over you. I’m not saying you have to wish harm on that girl, but you don’t have to pray for her marriage. She stole your husband, for goodness sake.”

“She didn’t steal my husband.” Aliyah took a generous bite of her gyro, her eyes on the television screen as she savored the taste of soft bread, seasoned lamb, raw onions, and cream sauce.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot,” Deanna said sarcastically. “You *gave* him to her.” She picked up her gyro again and took a bite, a disturbed expression on her face as she stared at the TV, her cheeks bulging slightly as she chewed.

Aliyah lifted the remote from next to Deanna and turned up the volume, but it was difficult to pay attention to what the detective actress was saying to the police officer.

“Even when we were in college,” Deanna said, raising her voice over the television, “you always wanted to make everyone happy. But there’s only one woman who can make a man happy, and that’s his wife.”

Aliyah remained silent until she finished her gyro. “She is his wife,” she said as she lifted a napkin from the plate and wiped her hands and mouth.

“And she was also his *second* wife.”

Aliyah gritted her teeth. “Deeja, let’s not go there.”

“Ally, please. You know I’m right. You practically became the poster child for women supporting polygamy, and that was a terrible mistake. You don’t let some woman convince you it’s your Islamic duty to share your husband.”

“I suggested polygamy, she didn’t,” Aliyah said, voice clipped. “Anyway, what does it matter now? I’ve been divorced for over a year. Leave it alone.”

“No, I can’t,” Deanna said. “I’m really bothered that you didn’t take my advice.”

“Why do you think you have the answer to everything? You may be a marriage counselor, but that doesn’t make you an expert on marriage.”

“Do you even hear yourself? Of course that makes me an expert on marriage. This is my area of expertise. I did my doctorate thesis on—”

“Yes, I know, as you’ve said a million times. But every marriage isn’t salvageable, Deeja.”

“See, Ally, this is what pisses me off, your defeatist attitude. Do you know why I’ve been married for eleven years and why Jacob and I would never even think about divorce?”

“Um, let’s see...” Aliyah said sarcastically. “Could it be because of Allah’s *qadr* maybe?”

“This is why you should spend less time in the masjid. You think it’s okay to hide behind religion so you can blame all your mistakes on some divine plan. God helps those who help themselves.”

“I’m just trying to—”

“Stop trying, Ally, and *do*,” Deanna interjected, annoyance in her tone. “I don’t sit around saying I’m *trying* to stay married. I stay married. I don’t sit around saying I don’t want my husband to marry another wife. I make sure I’m the only wife he’ll ever want. If you think proactively, then you won’t react to life. You’ll make life happen.”

Aliyah rolled her eyes. “And how do I do that? Do tell.”

“First of all, you have to quit being so cynical. You look way better than Matt’s new wife. There’s no way he would’ve chosen her over you without you egging him on. If you would’ve just—”

Aliyah raised a palm to Deanna. “Deeja, just stop, please. I can’t stand all this *if only if*. I don’t believe in that. You can call me a religious fanatic if you want, but I believe it was Allah’s plan that I’m not married to Matt anymore. I did everything I could to save my marriage.”

“Except listen to your best friend.”

Aliyah’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe you’re saying that. I did listen to you. I just—”

“Then how did Matt end up marrying that tramp while you were still married to him?”

“Like I said, Deeja. I listened to you, but I just had a different point of view.”

“Then you didn’t listen to me. You can’t just *hear* me. You have to listen. The way to keep a man from marrying someone else is you keep the subject of divorce and polygamy out of your marriage. Jacob would never marry another woman because I don’t give him any reason to.”

“Jacob would never marry another woman, Deeja, because he doesn’t want to. You said yourself that he believes it’s part of Islam to respect the laws of the land and that he just doesn’t think polygamy is worth the headache.”

“Yes, but the main reason he’ll never do it is because I make sure I’m good enough for him. I take care of myself. I give him sex every night. I pamper him. I—”

“I, I, I,” Aliyah said as she pointed the remote forward and powered off the television. “Dr. Deanna Bivens, the I-specialist.”

“I know you think I’m arrogant, but—”

“Overly confident is what crosses my mind. But I don’t think *arrogant* is too far off the mark.”

“—I know what I’m talking about. I’ve counseled dozens of couples, Ally, so I’m not talking out the side of my neck. There really is something to putting in the work to make a marriage last. When a married person cheats, there’s always a reason, a preventable reason.”

“Matt didn’t cheat.”

“He didn’t have to. You gave him permission to betray you right in front of your face. With your approval.”

“That’s not how I define supporting polygyny.”

“You can try to put an Islamic stamp on this if you want. But the bottom line is that your marriage was in trouble and instead of proving how much *you* were worth, you supported the very thing that was tearing apart your marriage.”

Aliyah felt exhausted all of a sudden. “Look, Deeja, I don’t feel like fighting about this anymore. What’s done is done. I can’t rewrite the past.”

“I’m not bringing this up to open old wounds. I just don’t feel comfortable helping you find a new husband until I’m sure you understand what marriage means.”

Aliyah felt herself getting upset again, but she remained composed. “I didn’t ask you to help me find a new husband.”

“You don’t have to, Ally. I’m your friend, so I’ll do whatever I can to help you whether you ask me or not. But the first step is learning what it means to be a woman.”

Aliyah clenched her jaw. “And now you’re an expert on the female sex?”

The chiming of a phone came from next to Deanna. Deanna turned and reached into her handbag and withdrew her cell phone. “That’s Jacob,” Deanna said apologetically after looking at the screen. She returned the phone to her purse and stood, pulling the straps over her shoulder. “Sorry I couldn’t stay long. I just wanted to give you something decent to eat. I figured you’re starving yourself up in here.”

“Thanks for stopping by,” Aliyah said in as cordial a voice as she could manage. She stood and followed her friend to the door.

Deanna drew Aliyah into a hug and kissed her on the cheek. “I love you,” Deanna said as she opened the front door.

“I love you too,” Aliyah said. “*As-salaamu’alaikum.*”

Aliyah closed the door as the sound of Deanna’s footsteps faded in the apartment hallway. As she turned the bolt to lock the door, Aliyah realized she

hadn't prayed *Maghrib*, the sunset prayer. She glanced at the clock and sighed. It was already time for *'Ishaa*. She had to get better at praying on time.

After completing her prayers, Aliyah sat on the carpeted floor of the living room, her body heavy in exhaustion. *I don't know how much more I can take from Deanna*. The plea had come from a deep place inside, and Aliyah frowned at their implication. Was she really thinking of giving up her best friend?

"You need to be more like me," Deanna often said to Aliyah.

Maybe Deanna was right. Aliyah needed to have more confidence in herself. If Aliyah were more like Deanna, perhaps Aliyah would still be married to Matthew. Aliyah couldn't deny that a part of her envied the relationship that Deanna had with Jacob. It was obvious that Jacob absolutely adored his wife. Aliyah would often overhear Jacob talking about Deanna at work. Occasionally, when Deanna was assigned to conduct a marriage workshop, she and Jacob would facilitate the workshop together, and the chemistry and connection between them was undeniable. Once, when Aliyah and Matthew had attended one of the workshops, they had left in awe and were full of determination to implement some of the marriage-saving strategies Deanna and Jacob had discussed.

But as inspiring as Deanna was as a speaker and marriage counselor, she was becoming more and more difficult to deal with as a friend. In college, Aliyah and Deanna had bonded like long-lost sisters being reunited for the first time. They had so much in common then. They were both new Muslims struggling with difficult families. They were both academics with big dreams and high hopes. They both wanted to run their own businesses *and* be dedicated wives and mothers. And most importantly, they both were determined to make Islam the foundation and focus of their lives.

On the soft carpet of her living room, Aliyah murmured the Arabic phrases of glorification and praise of God, as was the prophetic custom after obligatory prayer. Her gaze was on the upturned palm of her right hand, where she was using her thumb to enumerate the recitation of *dhikr*. But her conflicted feelings about her friendship with Deanna were distracting her from the remembrance of Allah.

Could what Deanna and I have even be called a friendship? Aliyah wondered. In college perhaps, she considered thoughtfully. But even back then, when all seemed to be going well for their lives and friendship, Deanna had been the anchor of their relationship. At the time, Aliyah saw this as an immense blessing. She had been suffering from bouts of depression after her parents told her to never call or visit the family again "if you insist on being part of that Osama bin Laden religion." Aliyah had been very close to her family and had never imagined that the all-encompassing Christian love her parents talked so much about would not be extended to their now-Muslim daughter.

During this difficult time, Deanna's presence alone was enough to cheer Aliyah up. Deanna would cook for her, accompany her to Islamic events, give

her surprise parties, treat her to a day at the spa, and even sleep on the floor in Aliyah's dorm room if Aliyah was having a particularly bad day.

Sometimes Aliyah had felt like a burden to Deanna, but Deanna would always reassure Aliyah that she was happy to be there for her and earn so many blessings. "You're my sister, girl. I love you. If you're happy, I'm happy."

But Aliyah was often racked with guilt because she just couldn't muster the same enthusiasm for impetuous fun, or for Deanna's presence. There were times she really did want to be alone. Even when she was a child, Aliyah hated crowds. Attending church on Christmas and Easter often stressed her out because there were just too many people in one room, and Aliyah didn't know what to do with herself. So when Deanna would plan sudden trips to the mall or announce that they were going to some relaxing retreat for the weekend, Aliyah would often feel suffocated with anxiety. In college, there were even times that Deanna's presence itself was suffocating.

But Aliyah was never able to bring herself to talk to Deanna fully and honestly about her feelings, though there were moments that she tried. Whenever the thought came to her, she felt like an ingrate. *I mean, what kind of person gets upset when her best friend is going out of her way to be nice and helpful?*

"Shut up, girl. You know you love me." That had been Deanna's response when Aliyah had, shortly after the divorce, mustered up the courage to tell Deanna that her unannounced visits, incessant phone calls, and constant "constructive criticism" were becoming too much to bear.

"I just need some time alone," Aliyah had said.

"That's what got you into this mess in the first place," Deanna had responded flippantly, a playful grin on her face. "You spending time alone while you let your husband sleep with another woman." Then she pulled Aliyah into a tight hug and said, "Let's go shopping. That will make you feel better."

But it didn't make Aliyah feel better. And Aliyah had come back home with three department-store bags full of clothes and accessories that she didn't want or need.

"I think you're jealous of me," Deanna had told Aliyah last week after they had another big argument over the "real reason" Aliyah was no longer married. As always, Deanna insisted that it was because Aliyah wasn't more like she was and because Aliyah had been open to letting Matthew marry another wife. Agitated and sick of Deanna's constant holier-than-thou nitpicking, Aliyah had said, "Maybe your marriage isn't so great. You don't know everything. For all you know, Jacob could be looking for another wife right now. I would if I were him. I can't imagine living with your nagging every day."

Aliyah immediately regretted the comment after she'd said it. But at the time, she felt justified. Couldn't Deanna just leave well enough alone already? *Okay, fine, your marriage is great. Your husband loves you and doesn't want another wife. But that's from Allah, not you. So shut up already.*

“I’m sorry,” Aliyah had said, dropping her head in shame. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay,” Deanna had replied, reaching out and squeezing Aliyah’s hands warmly. “I forgive you. I know it’s hard to have a friend like me.”

Aliyah had coughed laughter, nodding in agreement. Tears stung her eyes as she realized that Deanna was finally understanding the heart-wrenching struggle it was for Aliyah to maintain their friendship.

“It would be hard for me too if my friend had the life I could never have,” Deanna had added before pecking Aliyah on the cheek with a kiss.

The shrilling of the home phone interrupted Aliyah’s thoughts, and she immediately stood and walked over to the cordless. She glanced at the caller identification display and sighed when she saw the name *Nelson, Benjamin*.

“*As-salaamu’alikum*, Uncle Ben,” Aliyah said as if exhaling into the phone. She didn’t feel like talking about marriage right then, but she couldn’t keep avoiding her uncle. Besides, after the tense visit with Deanna, she relished the opportunity to hear from someone who actually believed she had all she needed to be happy and make someone else happy on top of that. She was tired of being Matt’s “other wife,” the wife he didn’t choose after he married another woman—with her support.

“*Wa’alaiku-mus-salaam wa rahmatullaahi wa barakaatuh*, my beloved niece,” Benjamin practically sang through the receiver.

Aliyah burst out laughing. Benjamin’s mood was always upbeat whenever he felt he’d finally found “the one,” the man who was Aliyah’s long-lost soul mate, the man for whom (by some divine order) Matthew had only been Aliyah’s boot camp in preparation for “the real deal.”

“Who is it this time?” Aliyah said, an expectant smile lingering on her face.

“Hey,” Benjamin said playfully, “that’s no attitude to have before I announce who your Prince Charming is.”

“You say that every time.”

“This time is different. I really think this is the one.”

Aliyah chuckled. “And you say that every time too.”

“Well,” Benjamin said guiltily, laughter in his voice, “this one called me a couple of weeks ago and asked that I give him a chance to prove he’s the one for you. But I didn’t want to tell you until I was sure he was worthy.”

“Does he have a green card?” Aliyah asked jokingly.

“Yes.”

“A job?”

“Yes,” Benjamin said, “and a successful side business.” Aliyah could practically hear her uncle beaming in triumph.

“That actually makes money?”

“Yes, lots of it.”

Aliyah was unable to temper the growing curiosity. “And he called you, not the other way around?”

“Yes, he called me.” Benjamin chuckled self-consciously. “Truth be told, if I would’ve known he was looking, I would’ve called him myself. He’s definitely the kind of man I think would see how special you are and never take that for granted.”

“Do I know him?”

“Yes, I think you do.”

Aliyah furrowed her brows as she searched her mind for who this could be. “How? From the masjid?”

Benjamin was silent momentarily. “Look, Aliyah,” he said, his voice more serious. “Before you give your answer, just think about it, okay?”

“Uncle Ben,” Aliyah said, her voice stern and cautious. “Don’t tell me this is another one of those perverted she-could-be-my-second-wife brothers.”

“Aliyah, don’t say that.”

“Uncle Ben!” Aliyah should have known better than to get her hopes up. She had made it abundantly clear that she was not entertaining the proposal of any married men. She was not interested in another Matt-style disaster. She didn’t want to marry someone and wonder whether or not she would be the woman he dumped in the end.

“It’s Jacob.”

It took several seconds before Aliyah registered her uncle’s words.

“What?”

“I know it’s unexpected, Aliyah,” Benjamin said, apology in his tone. “But he and I have been talking almost every day, and I really think this could work if—”

Aliyah felt faint all of a sudden, and her heart raced in confusion and shock. “Let’s not talk about this anymore,” she said, almost choking on her words.

“But, Aliyah, he’s really seri—”

“*As-salaamu’alaikum*, Uncle Ben,” Aliyah said through gritted teeth before pulling the phone away from her ear and disconnecting the call.

Her Secret Admirer

“There are five ingredients to a successful marriage,” Deanna said as she stepped from behind the podium to make herself more fully visible to the audience. “Selflessness, trust, honesty, intimacy, and confidence.” She casually slipped her hands into the pockets of her wide-leg black pants, conscious of the intrigue that her powerful words and exotic appearance inspired in the audience. “You might be thinking to yourself: But she forgot to mention love. She forgot to mention communication. She forgot to mention friendship.” Deanna smiled and shook her head, the cloth of her rust colored hijab moving with her. She had chosen the color because it was subtle enough to exude humility and bold enough to accentuate her light creamy brown complexion. “No, I didn’t forget any of these things. Love can never be an *ingredient* to a successful marriage.” She lifted her hands as if to ward off an attack. “I know, I know. You want the moderators to forcibly remove me from this marriage conference.”

There were ripples of laughter throughout the auditorium.

“But an ingredient is what you put into something for a desired result,” she said. “And love is not something you put into a marriage. You either bring love with you before you tie the knot, or it blossoms as a natural result of a successful marriage.”

She walked toward the other end of the stage. “And as for communication and friendship. Communication in itself isn’t an ingredient to a successful marriage. It’s a natural result of selflessness, trust, and honesty. Without selflessness, trust, and honesty, communication is not helpful; it’s harmful. And as for friendship,” she said, “that too is a natural result of selflessness, trust, and honesty.”

She nodded her head toward the large projector screen that displayed the cover of her bestselling marriage advice book, *You Can Have Him All To Yourself*. “And as I discuss in the chapter entitled ‘Confidence Is Sexy,’ having confidence in yourself and your self-worth not only makes you more physically attractive, it is also a lifesaver, a marriage lifesaver. Because that confidence you feel translates into confidence in your marriage and confidence in your spouse. And guess what? That confidence is contagious. And it serves as one of the most formidable forces protecting you or your spouse from even considering divorce.” She smiled then added, “Or cheating.”

There was a roar of applause as Deanna descended the steps on the side of the stage, and a surge of pride rose in her chest as she realized that she had effortlessly wowed the audience once again.

Aliyah brought her hands together in applause then glanced at her wristwatch. She wondered if it would be rude to leave the convention center right

then. Weeks before her uncle Benjamin had called to tell her that Jacob, Deanna's husband of eleven years, had expressed interest in marrying her, Aliyah had reluctantly agreed to come to the *Don't Get Lost in Love* marriage conference. Her best friend—Dr. Deanna Bivens, Ph.D.—was an invited speaker and facilitator for several sessions and had insisted that Aliyah attend.

"I don't see the point," Aliyah had told Deanna when she'd first mentioned it. "I'm divorced."

"That's all the more reason you should come," Deanna had said. "It can help you understand your mistakes better."

You mean you can help me understand my mistakes better, Aliyah had wanted to say. But she'd held her tongue. There was no use arguing with Deanna. It never ended well, at least not when Aliyah appeared to have a mind of her own.

"There you are!"

Aliyah's shoulders jerked in surprise as Deanna's smiling face appeared in front of her. Aliyah had no idea how Deanna was able to single her out in such a large crowd.

"Let's go get something to eat," Deanna said, tugging on Aliyah's hand. "I'm famished."

"I'm kind of tired actually," Aliyah said as she stood, Deanna still tugging on her hand. "I wanted to go home and get some work d—"

"Oh, girl please," Deanna said, cutting Aliyah off mid-sentence. "You promised me that we'd spend this whole weekend together."

Aliyah furrowed her brows. On the stage, the moderator was announcing the next speaker. "I said I'd try to come to some of your sessions if I wasn't busy," Aliyah said in a hushed tone, leaning into Deanna.

"I have one more session tonight," Deanna said as she looped her arm through Aliyah's and started walking toward the auditorium exit.

Aliyah felt a bout of anxiety overcome her. "What time?"

"Nine o'clock," Deanna said. "But don't worry, I'm free until then."

Aliyah's eyes widened. "That's in two and half hours, Deeja. I can't—"

"Thank you so much for that," an older woman said, leaning into the aisle as Deanna and Aliyah passed. "It was really eye-opening."

"Thank *you*," Deanna said, halting her steps and turning to face the woman, a broad smile on her face. "People like you are the reason I work so hard."

"Well, it's much appreciated," the woman said. "Truly. It's so inspirational to see young people taking marriage seriously. Sessions like these should be mandatory for young couples. They take marriage so lightly these days."

"I *know*. Don't they?" Deanna side-eyed Aliyah.

"You all have a good evening," the woman said as the next speaker took the podium.

"You too," Deanna replied, beaming, and Aliyah sensed a hint of triumph in Deanna's gait as they exited the auditorium.

“That’s a sign from Allah,” Deanna said when they were in the conference hall lobby area.

Aliyah was distracted by thoughts of how to get out of having dinner with Deanna and attending another session. “What?”

“That woman,” Deanna said. “I think Allah sent her so that you’ll take me more seriously.”

“Or maybe He sent her so you’ll be grateful for the blessings He’s given you in your work,” Aliyah said. “Everything isn’t about proving me wrong.”

“I’m not trying to prove you wrong, Ally. There’s no point in wasting time on something like that.”

“Well, it seems all you have time for these days.”

“Ally, I don’t need to prove you wrong. There’s nothing to prove. You’re wrong, and that’s clear, even to you. The only thing you need to do is stop being so committed to failure.”

Aliyah swallowed the anger building in her chest. She turned away from Deanna and pretended to study the conference schedule on a large vinyl sign hanging from the ceiling.

“I paid for you to come here so you can learn something,” Deanna said, “not to prove you wrong. I don’t want to see you throw away another marriage.”

Hmph, Aliyah thought. *Another marriage*. Aliyah hadn’t even met anyone she wanted to marry, so how could she throw away a marriage that didn’t exist? “*It’s Jacob*,” Benjamin had said to her a week ago. “*He asked that I give him a chance to prove he’s the one for you.*”

Aliyah shifted in guilty discomfort at the memory. Maybe she’d misunderstood her uncle. It was impossible that he could’ve been talking about Deanna’s husband. Jacob and Deanna were a power couple. They were invincible. They loved each other. Jacob would never want to marry anyone else. He did marriage workshops with Deanna. He’d even written the introduction to her book *You Can Have Him All To Yourself*. Why would he do that if he knew Deanna wouldn’t have *him* all to herself?

This was all one big misunderstanding, Aliyah realized. It had to be. Her uncle must have confused Jacob with someone else. Or maybe Aliyah herself had misheard. Whoever this “Prince Charming” was who Benjamin believed was “the one,” it wasn’t Jacob, at least not Deanna’s Jacob.

“It’s Jacob,” Deanna said.

Aliyah’s heart nearly leaped from her chest as she turned around, wide-eyed, to meet Deanna’s gaze.

“It’s Jacob,” Deanna said again, grinning as she grabbed Aliyah’s hand and pulled her forward, walking swiftly toward the glass doors leading outside. “I knew it all along.”

“You did?” Aliyah asked, stumbling over her words—and her legs—as she stared dumbly at Deanna. The cool February air drifted toward them as Deanna

opened the door and they stepped into the darkening evening and bustling atmosphere of downtown Washington, D.C.

“*As-salaamu’alikum*, sweet cake!” Deanna called out as she bounded toward a small crowd gathered on the wide sidewalk near a streetlight. “I knew it! I knew it!” Deanna shouted, laughter in her voice as she released Aliyah and rushed toward the crowd. Deanna laughed as she embraced a man in the crowd, and they kissed briefly on the lips.

“*Wa’alaiku-mus-salaam*, honey,” Jacob said coolly, a knowing grin on his face.

Deanna glanced back and gestured for Aliyah to come join them. “It’s Jacob,” Deanna said, a smile still plastered to her face. “He said he couldn’t make it to the conference. But he just wanted to surprise me. I *knew* it,” she said again, brushing his cheek with a kiss.

The pounding in Aliyah’s heart was deafening as she took a cautious step back. Her mouth opened to protest, but her tongue wouldn’t move. Even in that confusing moment, she noticed him looking at her. Not Jacob, but a man next to him. The man had a closely trimmed beard and wore a business suit that did little to conceal his athletic build. There was an air of familiarity about him that Aliyah couldn’t place.

“Jacob, man, who’s that?” the man said in a low voice, clamping Jacob’s shoulder as he nodded his head discreetly in Aliyah’s direction.

“Did you guys eat yet?” Deanna asked, distracting Jacob’s attention away from the man.

“We were just about to walk to this *halaal* restaurant down the street.” Jacob’s tone was so nonchalant that Aliyah wondered if he even noticed that she was standing less than ten feet away. Or maybe he was behaving normally because it made no difference to him that Aliyah was nearby—because the thought of marrying Aliyah as a second wife had never crossed his mind.

Aliyah had purposely avoided Jacob at work all week, even going as far as to skip a mandatory faculty meeting out of fear he might be there. It was the first time she’d ever done anything like that. She normally took her job responsibilities seriously, especially since she no longer benefited from Matt’s income. Though Matt had custody of their now four-year-old son, Aliyah still had to factor in basic expenses for Ibrahim for when he came to visit; and she could barely pay basic expenses for herself. So she couldn’t afford to slack at work. In the six months since she started working at the local college, she had never missed a single day, even when she was ill enough to stay home. But on Thursday, two days ago, she had told her supervisor that she was too unwell to attend the faculty meeting.

“That’s perfect,” Deanna said, turning to Aliyah. “We were just about to eat too.”

“*MashaAllah,*” Jacob said, looking toward Aliyah for the first time. “Then come join us. But we should start walking now. It’ll probably be really crowded because of the conference.”

Aliyah immediately lowered her gaze. But she couldn’t help feeling self-conscious all of a sudden. In her mind’s eye, she reviewed how she’d looked when she left home earlier that day. She’d selected one of her business-casual cream and black blouse-skirt ensembles because she liked the way it complemented her gentle brown complexion. Inadvertently, she reached up and smoothed down the soft fabric of her cream hijab and made sure the black-studded scarf pin was still in place. But she couldn’t tell if her eyeliner, mascara, and frosted lip-gloss were undisturbed.

What is your problem? Astaghfirullah, Aliyah scolded herself, asking God’s forgiveness. She had no business worrying about her appearance in front of her best friend’s husband. Besides, most likely, she had misunderstood what her uncle was talking about. She hadn’t even given Benjamin a chance to explain himself before ending the call. But now she wondered what her uncle was trying to say before she’d hung up on him.

As Jacob had mentioned, the restaurant was crowded due to the overflow from the marriage conference, but the receptionist who greeted them said the wait for a table shouldn’t be more than thirty minutes. Aliyah felt the familiar tightening in her chest as she stood huddled with the group inside the restaurant near the entrance. She really should have found some excuse to go home. She wouldn’t be able to enjoy her food if she had to be surrounded by so many people, especially while sitting at a table with a bunch of strangers—and Jacob.

Aliyah glanced in the direction of Jacob and saw him laughing at something one of the other men said, Deanna at his arm laughing too. Aliyah looked away. A sense of loneliness weighed on her, and she found herself wondering what Matthew was doing right then. But the image of Nikki, his new wife, came to mind, souring any chance of reminiscing. Rage burned her chest, and she muttered a *du’aa* to calm herself. The supplication helped quell her anger, but sadness settled in its place.

Aliyah should have known that Nikki and Matt had known each other long before Nikki suddenly appeared, eager to learn about Islam. Matt had asked Aliyah to talk to Nikki and answer any of her questions, and being the naïve, trusting wife that she was, Aliyah enthusiastically fell into “help the clueless non-Muslim” mode. It wasn’t until months after talking on the phone with Nikki and occasionally inviting her over that Nikki casually mentioned that Matt had been her boyfriend in the last two years of high school and throughout most of college. Nikki had broken up with Matt mainly because she feared a long-distance relationship wouldn’t work, so she’d suggested that they date other people to avoid feeling like they were tied down. When Nikki tracked Matt down years later, he was on the verge of converting to Islam, which was an immediate

turnoff for her. So once again, they lost touch—until she reappeared after Matt married Aliyah, now suddenly interested in Islam herself.

“Excuse me,” the receptionist said, approaching the group, “we have a table for eight ready now.”

Wow, Aliyah thought to herself. Were they really that many? A surge of apprehension rose inside of her, and pain pulsed at her temples as she wondered where she would sit. But it turned out that Aliyah didn’t have to worry about that.

“Come on, girl,” Deanna said, almost yanking Aliyah forward as she made her way to the front of the group. “Let’s get the best seats.”

“The best seats” ended up being at one end of two tables pushed together near a window. Aliyah breathed a sigh of relief as she settled in a seat directly opposite Deanna. Moments like these she really appreciated her best friend. Even as a child, Aliyah was never good at speaking up for herself and saying what she wanted. As an adult, the only time she felt completely comfortable speaking her mind was when she was in front of a classroom. It wasn’t the worst trait in the world, but at times it was debilitating. And, tonight, had it not been for Deanna’s proactive move to get to the table first and ensure that they weren’t sandwiched between anyone, Aliyah would probably have suffered an anxiety attack before the meal was over.

“*As-salaamu’alaikum*, sister. I don’t think I’ve met you before.”

Aliyah was fumbling with her menu when she had the odd sensation that someone was looking at her. She looked up to find the man from earlier sitting diagonally across from her next to Jacob, who was sitting next to Deanna (which put Jacob almost directly across from Aliyah). Instinctively, Aliyah glanced to her left to see who was sitting next to her. She recognized the woman immediately. Aliyah couldn’t recall the woman’s name, but she was definitely one of Aliyah’s Facebook friends. The woman’s profile picture frequently appeared in Aliyah’s newsfeed.

“Jacob,” the man said, “is this Brother Benyameen’s niece, the one you were telling me about?”

Taken aback, Aliyah creased her forehead as she looked at the man. Was he talking about her? Muslims often referred to her uncle as Benyameen, the Arabic translation for the name Benjamin.

“Yes, it is,” Jacob said, a proud smile on his face. But his eyes were skimming the menu he was holding.

Aliyah felt a soft kick to her shin under the table, and she immediately glared at Deanna. *What?* Aliyah mouthed. In response, Deanna wore a wide smile and jerked her head in the man’s direction. *What?* Aliyah mouthed again, this time with an exaggerated look of confusion on her face. *That’s him*, Deanna mouthed back. *That’s who?* Aliyah replied. But Deanna just chuckled quietly and rolled her eyes. She picked up her menu and raised it high enough to block the lower part of her face, a clear hint that, whoever this man was, Aliyah was supposed to impress him tonight.

“Your name is Aliyah, right?” the man said.

Feeling awkward and put on the spot, Aliyah cheeks burned in embarrassment, but she managed a noncommittal nod. “Yes,” she mumbled.

“Brother Benyameen talks about you all the time,” the man said.

“Aliyah,” Jacob said, an apologetic smile creasing one corner of his mouth, “this is my brother, Larry. He took his *shahaadah* a few months ago.”

Aliyah realized then why the man seemed so familiar. He and Jacob resembled each other. And Aliyah may have even met Larry in passing years ago, before he was Muslim.

“But the brothers call me Ya’qoob,” Larry said quickly. Aliyah sensed the brother’s need to feel affirmation as a Muslim. In a way, it reminded her of Matthew, and a tinge of sadness pinched her. If there was one thing a new Muslim should never do, it was eagerly seek other Muslims’ approval.

“That’s because they keep confusing you with me,” Jacob said, humor in his tone.

Aliyah couldn’t keep from smiling. It was kind of funny, Larry thinking that the Arabic translation of Jacob was a “Muslim name” the brothers had given him.

A thought came to Aliyah suddenly. “Are you married?” she said, her tone a combination of hope and humor as she looked at Larry. It was an aha moment for Aliyah. Maybe it was Larry whom her uncle had been talking about when he’d referred to a brother “Jacob” interested in marrying her. Benjamin knew Jacob and Deanna, but he wasn’t close enough to them to easily distinguish Jacob from Larry. They did favor each other significantly. Even their voices sounded similar. And if Larry referred to himself as “Ya’qoob” whenever he called Benjamin, it was unlikely that her uncle would know it wasn’t Deanna’s husband he was talking to, but Deanna’s brother-in-law. So maybe Larry was the married brother looking for another wife—hence Aliyah’s sudden question.

The deafening silence at the table made Aliyah realize her faux pas. The sister next to her side-eyed her and contorted her face in disapproval.

Married ladies! First rule of thumb: Dump your single girl friends! Ijs.

Aliyah cringed. *Juwayriah bint Abdullah*. The sister’s name came to her just then. *Oh my God*, Aliyah thought to herself. The sister next to her was the one who’d posted that “rule of thumb” Facebook status a few months ago, sparking one of the longest and most heated social media debates in Aliyah’s online friend list.

Aliyah had expected Juwayriah to un-friend her after posting that controversial point of view (since, technically speaking, Aliyah was now single), and Aliyah remembered being surprised that the Juwayriah didn’t. But maybe that rule of thumb only applied in real life interactions, Aliyah figured.

“No,” Larry said, embarrassed laughter in his tone. Aliyah sensed that Larry was flattered by her question, naturally oblivious to the fact that the inquiry was not motivated by any personal interest in him. “But I hope to be soon,” he added, his gaze resting on her long enough to make her shift uncomfortably in her seat.

The flirtatious glint in his eye was unmistakable, and Aliyah was mortified for Larry. Someone really should have taught him about the social etiquette of lowering his gaze. Aliyah was all for letting new Muslims take the baby steps they needed to embrace the Islamic faith at their own pace, but gawking at females was one of the first things Aliyah felt male converts needed to curtail. It really was unbecoming, especially on a man who otherwise appeared levelheaded and intelligent.

“Are you all ready to order?” a perky voice said, interrupting Aliyah’s thoughts.

“Yes, we are,” Jacob said quickly, apparently in an effort to shift the focus to something other than Aliyah’s social blunder and Larry’s naiveté.

“Let’s talk some time,” Larry said, the side of his mouth twitching in a grin.

Aliyah met his gaze briefly, surprised to feel her own eyes glinting flirtatiously. “Yes, let’s,” she said in a low voice.

3

The Other Woman

Aliyah turned to the left then to the right as she surveyed her appearance in the full-length mirror affixed to the door of her bedroom. *Not bad*, she thought to herself, an almost imperceptive grin forming on her lips. She had feared that the dark chocolate business suit wouldn't compliment her skin tone, but the silk ivory pearl-button blouse and matching georgette hijab brought out her brown complexion as well as the rich color of the tailored blazer and pants. *O Allah*, she silently supplicated, *You have made my physical constitution good, so make my character good also.*

As she drove to work Thursday morning, Aliyah's thoughts drifted to Larry. In the two weeks since they'd met at the *halaal* restaurant during the weekend of the marriage conference, Aliyah and Larry had spoken nearly every day. "Call me Ya'qoob," he'd told her during their first conversation. "I like that name."

"It's your brother's name," Aliyah said humorously, "only in Arabic."

"I know," Larry said, a tinge of sadness and humor in his tone. "It kind of grew on me." Larry told Aliyah that after a brother in the masjid first addressed him by that name, he'd researched its origin and came across the story of Prophet Ya'qoob in the Qur'an. "He went through so much, yet he remained patient," Larry said reflectively. "I could use that sort of inspiration in a name."

"I can understand that," Aliyah had replied. "I think we should find inspiration wherever we can."

"Did you know that in the Qur'an, the name Israel is actually another name for Jacob, the Prophet Ya'qoob?" Larry had childlike excitement in his voice. "The children of Israel are descendants of Jacob."

"Really?" Aliyah said, interest piqued. But she was more impressed with Larry's knowledge and spiritual motivation than with the information itself. "No, I didn't know that."

The chiming of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts. She glanced to where her cell phone lay in the compartment next to the driver's seat, and she was surprised to see a photo of Matthew appear on the screen. Though she and Matthew communicated regularly regarding their son Ibrahim, it was unlike Matthew to call early in the morning when they were both due at work. Aliyah's heart constricted in trepidation. Had something happened to Ibrahim?

"*As-salaamu'alaikum*," Aliyah said after accepting the call on speakerphone so she could use both hands to steer the car. "Is everything okay?" She was raising her voice so loudly that it verged on yelling, which was a bad habit of hers whenever she used the speakerphone option.

"*Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam*," a soft female voice replied.

Aliyah drew her eyebrows together. "Who's this?"

"This is Nicole."

Oh, Nikki. But why was Matthew's wife calling her? Aliyah and Nikki would sometimes see each other in passing whenever Aliyah came to pick up Ibrahim, but they hadn't spoken at length since Aliyah's divorce. *Oh my God*, Aliyah thought suddenly. Had something happened to Matt *and* Ibrahim?

"What's going on?" Aliyah asked. "What happened?"

"Everything's fine." There was a touch of haughtiness in Nikki's tone, as if amused by Aliyah's panic. "I'm just using Matt's phone because mine isn't working."

"Oh, okay..." Aliyah was unsure what to say.

"I know you're probably on your way to work," Nikki said, "so I won't take too much of your time." She drew in a deep breath, and Aliyah sensed that Nikki was preparing to say something offensive. "When my phone is fixed, I'll text you my number. That way you can communicate directly with me from now on."

"Excuse me?" Aliyah said, confused.

"It's not appropriate for you and Matt to be talking to each other since you're no longer married," Nikki said. "So if you have any questions or concerns about Ibrahim, call me."

What the—? A surge of rage lit Aliyah's chest. The mere sound of her son's name on this woman's tongue was enough to make Aliyah want to go through the phone. Was this woman actually saying that Aliyah had to talk to *her* for anything related to her own son?

"Thank you for letting me know." Aliyah spoke through clenched teeth, but she made her best effort to sound cordial. "But I'm walking into my office now," she lied. "So we'll have to talk later." Aliyah stabbed the end-call button, and her body shivered in fury as she steered the car onto the exit toward the local college.

Now I'm the other woman? Aliyah thought, irate. Had Nikki lost her mind? Had Matt?

It's not appropriate for you and Matt to be talking to each other since you're no longer married.

The words resonated in Aliyah's mind in time with the angry thumping in her chest. *Oh, but it was appropriate for you to talk my husband while we were married*, she said to Nikki in her head. *And you didn't even have a child to talk about!*

A sharp pain sliced through Aliyah's temples as she pulled her car into a parking space in the lot reserved for faculty and staff. She turned off the ignition and took a moment to breathe in and out so she could gather her composure. The last thing she wanted was to come into work with a nasty attitude. She was only six and a half months into the standard one-year probation that all new employees went through, so she couldn't afford a bad day. The money wasn't much, but it did pay the bills, even if only barely. She was divorced, technically a single mother, so she didn't often allow herself the indulgence of imagining a better job.

But right then she imagined a better life. Aliyah wished she didn't get upset so easily. Now she would have to spend half the day trying to calm down and focus on work.

Had Nikki purposely called at this time so she could unnerve Aliyah before work? Aliyah imagined that Matt must have told Nikki about Aliyah's hypersensitivity and anxiety attacks if she had to deal with confrontation. Sometimes it drove Matt nuts that he couldn't get a decent argument out of Aliyah. "What's wrong with you?" he'd said to her once. "Don't you ever get mad?" But Aliyah's anger came out in small bursts, usually in snarky remarks, but she'd immediately apologize afterwards and do all she could to smooth things over. In retrospect, that's probably why she'd pushed the idea of Matt taking Nikki as a second wife. It helped Aliyah avoid a confrontation with Matt or Nikki, because it had been clear Matt was really drawn toward Nikki and Nikki toward him. With polygyny, everybody could be happy. Or so she'd thought.

Nikki knew that Aliyah was overly accommodating. Was that why she'd timed her call right before Aliyah went into work? Nikki must have known that Aliyah wouldn't have time to discuss the issue, thus forcing Aliyah to comply—or to at least be duly informed without opportunity for a fuss. But Nikki's phone call could have waited until that evening. Ibrahim was at Matt and Nikki's house right then, so what was the point?

"That girl is jealous of you," Deanna often warned. "Watch your back."

Aliyah would laugh in response. "Jealous of *me*? For what?"

"What do you mean *for what*?" Deanna would say. "You're smart, educated, and good-looking, *mashaAllah*. But all she has is her looks. Barely."

Aliyah would listen only halfheartedly whenever Deanna talked like that. Nikki had majored in fashion design in college and had never pursued a degree after her bachelor's, but Aliyah didn't feel that made Nikki any less intelligent or less educated than she was. Yes, Aliyah knew that having a dual bachelor's in mathematics and computer science, a master's in education, and an unfinished doctorate in mathematics made people think of her as "smart" and "educated," but Aliyah's definitions of those terms weren't so simple. A person's worth couldn't be summed up on a piece of paper or resumé. If it could, then why did Matt choose Nikki over Aliyah? Why wasn't Matt so impressed with Aliyah's "papers" and accomplishments?

"He was intimidated by you," Deanna often said. "Most men need to feel superior to their wives. In everything," she added.

"Then why was he helping pay for my doctorate, Deeja?"

"And why did he *stop* paying for it? Long before divorce was even a topic of discussion?" Deanna said. "That's what you *should* be asking."

"He didn't have to pay for it in the first place," Aliyah said.

"Of course not," Deanna said. "That's the point. It was a control thing with him. He was supportive as long as you were indebted to him. But as soon as it looked like you were actually about to get that Ph.D., he put a stop to it. Fast.

And he had the nerve to say you shouldn't get a loan to pay for it yourself because you needed to focus on being a mother."

"He was right," Aliyah said. "After I had Ibrahim, it was hard juggling classes and research while I took care of him. And Matt saw how stressed I was. He was just looking out for me."

Deanna groaned, laughter in her voice. "One day you're going to realize that some people only help you so they can control the outcome."

Aliyah entered the math and science building and swiped her badge. "Good morning, Professor Thomas," she heard someone say. Aliyah glanced over her shoulder and saw her supervisor.

"Good morning, Dr. Warren," Aliyah replied, a wide smile on her face as she greeted the woman. Aliyah hoped there were no traces of her earlier fury.

"Will you be able to make it to today's faculty meeting?"

Aliyah's face became enflamed with mortification as she recalled trying to avoid Deanna's husband by telling Dr. Warren she was too unwell to attend a meeting. "Yes, I will be," Aliyah said, probably too enthusiastically.

Dr. Warren nodded. "Good. Enjoy your day."

"You too," Aliyah called after her.

Aliyah felt the vibration of her phone just as she unlocked her office door and pushed it open. She had turned off the ringer before getting out the car, as she routinely did before signing in to work. She hoped it wasn't Nikki again. Aliyah doubted she could handle the stress right then.

Aliyah pulled the straps of her handbag from her shoulder, set the bag on her desk, then unsnapped the compartment for her mobile phone. When she withdrew the phone, she saw that it was text message that had come through. She unlocked the phone and saw Larry's name on the display.

Salaamz. I hope you enjoy your day at work. I miss talking to you already :)

A smile pulled at Aliyah's lips as she put the phone back into her bag. She would text Larry later. She didn't want him to think she was sitting around waiting to hear from him. But she couldn't deny the flattery nestling inside her. It really did lift her spirits to read his message. It wiped away some of the lingering aggravation she'd felt after talking to Nikki. She doubted the aggravation would ever be completely gone, at least not until she spoke to Matt and addressed this stupid "you can't talk to your son's father" rule. But for now, she appreciated Larry's small kindness. It was just what she needed to get through the day.

"I need your advice." It was Aliyah's lunch break, and she'd decided to use the free moment to call Deanna about the conversation she'd had with Nikki earlier. Before calling Deanna, Aliyah had placed a sign on her office door saying she would return in an hour. She then closed the door and locked it, hoping no one would realize she was inside. She usually worked through her lunch hour and made herself available to help her supervisor or other administrators with anything they needed. It had become such a habit of Aliyah's that sometimes an administrator would approach her early in the morning and ask

if she could do something for them “during lunch.” But today Aliyah was too distracted and upset to care about impressing her superiors. She needed perspective. “I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time,” Aliyah said hesitantly.

“If it’s you calling,” Deanna said, her cheerful mood detectable in her voice, “no time is a bad time.”

Aliyah chuckled self-consciously. “*MashaAllah.*”

In that moment, Aliyah realized just how grateful she was that it wasn’t Deanna’s husband, Jacob, who’d called her uncle about marrying her as a second wife. It was Larry (who often called himself “Ya’qoob”) who’d called Benjamin. And because the discussion of marriage had been through phone calls alone, Benjamin never realized that it was Larry he’d been talking to the whole time. Aliyah had never spoken to Benjamin himself about the mix-up, but she was able to talk to Larry about it, who’d confirmed that he indeed had been calling her uncle Benjamin about marrying her.

“Nikki called me this morning,” Aliyah said, anxiety tightening in her chest as she blurted this out. “And she said I can’t talk to Matt about Ibrahim anymore. She said I have to talk to her, but I—”

“What!” Deanna said before Aliyah could finish her sentence. “Are you at your office now?”

“Yes,” Aliyah said. “It’s my lunch break, so I can’t talk long.”

“Don’t worry, *ukhti*,” Deanna said. “I’m coming.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” Aliyah’s heart raced in panic as she realized that Deanna intended to come to the college. Aliyah’s department had a strict no-visitors policy for faculty and staff during work hours, and Aliyah did not want to violate it. Occasionally, some of her colleagues would have family and friends visit, but these employees had tenure *and* the supervisor’s good graces. “I’m not allowed to have—”

“Girl, forget those people,” Deanna said. “I know about that stupid no-visitors rule. Jacob told me about it when they started it a few years ago, but that doesn’t faze me. I’m not going to let these people tell me I can’t be there for my best friend when she needs me.”

“Deanna, no, really.” Aliyah’s voice was a plea. “I can talk to you when I get home. It’s not a problem. I don’t want anyone to come here. They don’t even know I’m in my office. So we could just...” Aliyah’s voice trailed as she realized that Deanna was actually listening to her without interrupting. “...meet for dinner or something? Or even tomorrow, if that’s better for you?”

When Deanna didn’t respond, Aliyah pulled the phone from her ear and saw the standard mobile display. Her heart dropped. There was no indication that a call was in session. She should have known. Deanna had hung up already. Aliyah groaned and shook her head as she redialed Deanna.

Deanna answered after the first ring. “Don’t worry, Ally-poo,” she said before Aliyah could even give salaams. “I’m not letting that school tell us what to do.”

“But Deanna,” Aliyah said hesitantly, not wanting to offend her friend, “I could get in trouble.”

“Girl, shut up. They don’t own you,” Deanna said. “Don’t forget I’m the one who got you that job, so I can come up there any time I want. Now let me drive.”

Aliyah pulled the phone from her ear to see if the call was still active, and the call ended just as she did. Aliyah sighed as she set the phone on her desk and leaned back in her chair. Experiences like these were what kept Aliyah from confiding in Deanna more. Deanna rarely saw the world from anyone else’s vantage point.

Once, a few years ago, Deanna had made plans to spend a whole Saturday with Aliyah without even informing Aliyah beforehand. Deanna had bought the two of them tickets to a movie and planned to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening at an outlet mall taking advantage of closeout sales. But Aliyah and Matt had already made plans themselves and had even arranged for Matt’s parents to babysit Ibrahim while they were out. About an hour before Aliyah and Matt were scheduled to leave, Deanna showed up at their house. “Girl, get dressed,” Deanna had said when Aliyah opened the door. “We’re having a girls day out.” Taken aback, Aliyah didn’t know what to say. “But…” she had stammered, “Matt wants to spend time with me today.” Aliyah’s voice was pained, and she apologized with her eyes. “That’s perfect!” Deanna had replied, stepping inside the house and closing the door behind her. “I don’t mind if he joins us,” she said.

A loud knock along with the sound of a key being turned in the door interrupted Aliyah’s thoughts. She immediately jumped to her feet, worried that the custodial staff were doing their cleaning rounds. Though Aliyah was sure her presence wouldn’t make any difference to them, it was still embarrassing to imagine anyone realizing she was in her office when the sign on her door suggested she was not. The door opened just as Aliyah started to turn the handle herself.

“*As-salaamu’alikum*, my Aliyah-poo!” Deanna called out cheerfully, stepping inside the office. Patches of red colored Deanna’s yellowish brown cheeks as she smiled.

Aliyah quickly pushed the door closed and locked it. “How did you get here so fast?”

“I was dropping off some of my business cards at the masjid,” Deanna said. She chuckled and rolled her eyes. “You know those Muslims could use some *serious* help in their marriages.”

Aliyah started to ask Deanna how she had gotten a key to her office, but Aliyah remembered Deanna removing the original from Aliyah’s key ring shortly after Aliyah was hired at the college. At the time, Aliyah was cleaning out the office and setting up, and Deanna was helping. Though it had made Aliyah uncomfortable that Deanna would go through her purse and make a copy of the office key without asking, Aliyah told herself that Deanna was only trying to be helpful. Deanna having her own key made it easy for her to come and go when

Aliyah couldn't be in the office herself while setting up. Ironically, it was during this time that Aliyah was told about the no-visitors rule. Thankfully, it had been Jacob, the head of the math department, who had told her. But he assured her that for the time being, it wasn't an issue. No one would think Deanna was there because of Aliyah, he'd told her. At the time, the staff knew Deanna only as Jacob's wife.

"No offense," Deanna said.

Aliyah creased her forehead. "What?"

"Never mind." Deanna waved her hand dismissively as she settled in one of the student chairs in front of Aliyah's desk. "Tell me about this Nikki wench."

Aliyah was uncomfortable with Deanna's derogatory reference to Matt's wife. It treaded too closely to backbiting for her tastes, but she knew there was no use saying this to Deanna. In the past, whenever Aliyah had asked Deanna not to backbite, Deanna had rolled her eyes and said, "Girl, nobody's backbiting. I don't know what those masjid fanatics are putting in your head."

Aliyah decided to focus on the problem at hand, so she settled in her desk chair and explained to Deanna what had happened. "...and now she's saying it's not appropriate for me and Matt to talk anymore," Aliyah finished.

"I told you she's jealous of you," Deanna said.

Aliyah suppressed a groan. That was beside the point. She didn't need Deanna to psychoanalyze Nikki. Aliyah wanted practical advice on how to deal with the situation.

"No she's not." Aliyah was surprised by the exhausted brusqueness in her tone. Maybe it was Deanna's insistence on coming to the office against Aliyah's protests that was making Aliyah irritable. But whatever it was, Aliyah wasn't in the mood for Dr. Deanna Bivens, the know-it-all. She wanted Deeja, the friend.

"Look, Aliyah," Deanna said, her tone soft with empathy. Her expression was thoughtful as she leaned forward, her hands clasped on her lap. Deanna looked down for a moment, as if trying to find the right words for what she needed to say, and Aliyah got the feeling that Deanna was in therapist mode. "I don't blame Nikki just like I don't blame you."

Aliyah nodded, listening, though she was unsure what Deanna meant.

"Nikki looks at you like you look at me."

Aliyah moved her head in the beginning of a nod then stopped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Deanna drew in a deep breath and exhaled, apology in that sound. "Like I said, Aliyah. I don't blame you. But with you it's normal jealousy, but with Nikki, her jealousy is out of control."

"Jealousy?" Aliyah said, her eyebrows drawn together.

"It's okay, Aliyah," Deanna said, waving her head. "I can excuse your jealousy. But Nikki's is inexcusable. She's using it to—"

"Are you joking?" Aliyah coughed laughter. "Do you really think I'm *jealous* of you?" Of course, this wasn't the first time Deanna had mentioned

Aliyah's alleged jealousy, but it was the first time that Aliyah realized that Deanna actually meant it.

Deanna sighed and stood, lifting her handbag and pulling the straps over her shoulder. "I didn't mention that to offend you, Ally. I just mentioned it so you can understand better where Nikki is coming from. It's natural to feel jealous of someone who has a lot more going for them than you do. But it's not natural to let jealousy cloud your judgment. You don't let jealousy interfere with your interactions with me, so maybe you can help Nikki do the same with you."

Aliyah's offense nearly choked her, her words caught in her throat.

"I'm really happy to be here for you," Deanna said, her hand on the door handle as she turned to Aliyah. Deanna's lips formed a thin line, suggesting that she was troubled by something. "But next time, just keep in mind, I'm not always able to drop everything and come comfort you at a moment's notice. Some things you'll have to work through on your own," she added. "But I'll do what I can because I love you."

Aliyah went through the rest of day as if in a daze. She felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. At some moments, Aliyah felt like she was going to throw up; at other moments, as if she would break down crying. She sat through the math faculty meeting with a polite close-lipped smile plastered to her face. She nodded when the other faculty members nodded, laughed when they laughed, and jotted down notes when they jotted down notes. But all she could think about was how humiliated she felt. She didn't know whose audacity offended her more, Nikki's or Deanna's.

After the meeting, Aliyah sat in her office staring off into the distance. She couldn't bring herself to go home yet. She needed a moment to pull herself together. A lump developed in her throat as she realized how pathetic her life was. No, she wasn't jealous of Deanna, at least not consciously, but Aliyah couldn't deny that, like Deanna had said, Deanna had a lot more going for her than Aliyah did. If nothing else, Deanna knew how to keep a husband. Even if it had turned out that it was Jacob and not Larry who had called Benjamin about marrying Aliyah, at least Jacob would have been seeking another wife, not a divorce. And that spoke volumes. Aliyah had supported Matt marrying another wife, and still he'd divorced her.

"As-salaamu'alaikum."

Aliyah's shoulders jerked in surprise at the sound of a man's voice. She looked up and saw her department head standing in the open doorway. "Oh. *Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam*, Dr. Bivens," Aliyah said to Jacob.

"I'm sorry to come unannounced," he said.

"Is everything okay?" Aliyah was worried that someone had seen Deanna at Aliyah's office during lunch break.

"Yes, everything's fine," Jacob said. "It's not about work. Larry called me."

Oh. Thank God. Aliyah sighed in relief.

"He said he's spoken to your uncle about marrying you."

Aliyah smiled beside herself. Jacob's words reminded her that she wasn't without hope after all. Maybe Larry was indeed "the one," as her uncle so ardently believed. "Yes, he told me," Aliyah said.

"But he said you thought it was me who had called your uncle." Jacob had a troubled expression on his face, but a confused smile creased one corner of his mouth.

Aliyah's heart thumped in embarrassment, and her eyes widened in apology. "I'm sorry, Jacob," she said, professional etiquette dropping from her tone. "I didn't mean to..." Her voice trailed as she realized that there were no words that could excuse her behavior. It had been completely irresponsible for her to say that to Larry. She could have left the topic alone after Larry had replied to her inquiry saying yes he had been in touch with Benjamin. But she had been so relieved that she'd laughed out loud and said to Larry, "Oh my God. You won't believe what my uncle thought..." Then she told Larry point-for-point details about the conversation she and her uncle had had before she and Larry met in person at the restaurant.

"No, no, no," Jacob said, shaking his head. "It's okay. But I just wanted to make sure you didn't mention your uncle's phone call to Deanna."

"No, of course not," Aliyah said quickly. "I wouldn't do anything like that."

"Good." Jacob exhaled in relief. "I told Larry I'm really happy for him and that I completely support the marriage. If that's what you want, of course," Jacob added tentatively, as if waiting for Aliyah's confirmation.

"I'm definitely considering it," Aliyah said.

"I'm sorry about the confusion," Jacob said.

Aliyah laughed self-consciously. "No, *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have assumed. I should've known that you wouldn't do anything like that."

Jacob's forehead was creased as he regarded Aliyah briefly before averting his gaze. "Aliyah, are you saying you..." Confusion was in his voice as if he'd lost his train of thought. "No, Aliyah," he said finally, shaking his head. "What I'm saying is, it *was* me. But I told Larry I had spoken to your uncle before I knew he was interested in you. When my brother started calling your uncle, Benjamin and I spoke, and I told him that it was better if Larry married you."

Inadvertently, Aliyah's jaw dropped. She was at a loss for words.

Just then Aliyah recalled Larry's silence on the phone after she had laughed and told him about her uncle saying it was Jacob who had called about marrying her. Aliyah had assumed it was male jealousy that had kept Larry from laughing too. But now she realized it was because her detailed story had made him privy to information he'd never known before.

"But I just wanted to apologize," Jacob said. "Larry is really bothered by all of this. So I wanted to clear the air and let you know it was just a momentary lapse in judgment. I was going through a lot at the time, and I just thought if..." He shook his head, as if willing the thoughts from his mind. "Never mind. It was a stupid idea, and I should've never entertained the thought. I'm really sorry."

“It’s okay,” Aliyah said, surprised that she’d found her voice. “We all make mistakes.”

Jacob’s expression held a tinge of sadness, and Aliyah sensed that her words had offended him somehow. “Yeah,” he said, chuckling to himself. “We certainly do.”

Her Best Friend's Husband

Jacob and Deanna first met when Jacob was a Ph.D. candidate preparing to defend his thesis and Deanna was a second year doctorate student at the same university. Jacob had been sitting alone at a table in the food court when he heard a chair being pulled out across from him. He looked up from the soft drink in his hand and the array of open books in front of him to find a woman smiling down at him. The first things he noticed about her were her eyes and her hijab. Her eyes were a rich brown, the kind that makes you do a double take because you might have missed them at first glance. The hijab she wore was a burnt red, a detail that stood out to him because it was his mother's favorite color and because it brought the color of Deanna's cheeks.

"*As-salaamu 'alaikum*, Mr. Jacob Bivens," the woman said, setting down her food tray as she lowered herself into the seat she had pulled out for herself. "I'm Deanna Michaels. I remember you from your lecture at MSA career day."

Jacob smiled, flattered that he had made an impression at the Career Day Symposium sponsored by the Muslim Student Association about a month ago. "*Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam*. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I didn't say I enjoyed it," Deanna said, humorous sarcasm in her tone. "I said I remember you."

Jacob chuckled self-consciously and nodded. "Sorry about that."

"Are you coming to the dinner tonight?" Deanna looked at him in between putting forkfuls of lasagna into her mouth.

"Dinner?"

"The MSA is having a dinner tonight. Well, it's actually more like a cocktail party," Deanna said, "but without the cocktails."

"This is the first I've heard of it."

"You should come," she said. "You need a break from all that studying."

It struck Jacob how the woman was speaking to him as if they'd known each other for years. He didn't know whether to be flattered or offended. He'd never liked forward women. Before he became Muslim, there were times that he reveled in the attention he received from assertive females, but that was only when he had selfish motives. As early as middle school, he'd known that the woman he finally settled down with had to be not only educated and intelligent, but also humble and reserved.

Which was probably why he was still single. He was beginning to wonder if such a woman even existed. "What time does it start?" Jacob asked.

Deanna couldn't keep from grinning triumphantly. "Six thirty," she said. "In the MSA room."

Jacob nodded. "If I don't get too bogged down," he said noncommittally, "I'll see if I can stop by." But internally, he knew he had no intention of coming.

He wasn't a fan of religious-based clubs, though he occasionally felt obligated to accept invitations to speak.

"Give me your number."

For a second, Jacob thought he'd misheard, and an uncertain smile lingered on his face. "What?"

"Give me your cell phone number." She spoke as if it were the most natural request in the world. "I know you won't turn down the chance to spend more time with me." Her lips twitched in a flirtatious grin. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I could be your future wife."

Jacob laughed out loud. He liked this woman already. He wasn't one to laugh easily, but Deanna's confidence and not-so-subtle hints touched a part of him that he didn't know was there. "I'll give you my number if you give me yours," he said, mirroring her flirtatiousness.

"Deal," she said then opened her purse and withdrew her phone. "I'll give you a missed call."

When Jacob arrived at the MSA dinner, his attention was immediately drawn to the far corner of the room. A woman was leaning against a wall reading a book, oblivious to all the commotion and chatter around her. Her expression was one of thoughtful intrigue, as if the words on the page offered a perspective she had never considered before. *Educated and intelligent*, he found himself thinking. *And humble and reserved.*

He wondered if she, like he, had been convinced to come to this event though she desired to be elsewhere. The thought humored him, and he smiled to himself, as if he and she were of a single mind. He walked toward her, but before he was close enough to introduce himself, he heard someone yelling his name.

He turned to see Deanna bounding toward him with all the confidence of an old friend. "*As-salaamu'alikum*, Jacob. You came!" She was no longer wearing the burnt red hijab, and for some reason, this disappointed him. The shimmering gold cloth that she now wore struck him as excessive and gaudy. "*It's too much*," he heard his mother's voice in his head. "*If you want to make a statement, make it with your mouth shut.*"

Jacob's mother was a fashion connoisseur who ran a small but renowned public relations company known for its witty, often figurative advice about physical appearance and social image. She often made analogies between being mouthy and annoying, and wearing loud "look-at-me" clothes. As a teenager, Jacob was often frustrated and embarrassed by his mother's comments about people's wardrobes and behavior, especially when she was quoted in a newspaper or magazine or was being interviewed on local television. But as he grew older and became directly involved with the company, he began to understand the significance of what he'd previously interpreted as hypercritical and nitpicky.

“*Wa’alaiku-mus-salaam*,” Jacob said to Deanna, forcing a smile. He tried to keep from looking across the room at the woman leaning against the wall, but his gaze kept lingering in that direction.

“You must be hungry,” Deanna said. “Let me get you something.” A grin played at her lips. “But don’t worry, Jacob. I’ll find us a quiet place to sit down and enjoy each other’s company while we eat.”

Jacob offered a tightlipped smile that faded after Deanna turned around and headed toward the buffet tables. He found it unsettling the way Deanna was already referring to him by his first name. He was a respected adjunct professor at the university, so he was accustomed to being referred to as either *Professor* or *Mr.* before his last name. Amongst Muslims, the respectful title *Brother* was used if anyone referred to him by his first name alone. Only close friends and family called him “Jacob.”

Jacob glanced over to where he’d seen the woman reading a book, and he was disappointed to find that she was no longer there. He looked around the room, hoping she hadn’t left without him noticing. He scanned the faces of the crowd, and after a few minutes, he spotted her at one of the buffet tables, a paper plate in one hand and a large serving spoon in the other. He watched as she carefully tilted the spoon, a pile of spinach spilling onto the plate. Her mouth spread into a full-teeth smile, and she tossed her head back in laughter. And though it was the most irrational thing to do, he smiled too, as if it were he making her laugh. He glanced next to her and saw that it was Deanna who had been saying something to her.

“There you are,” Deanna said a few minutes later, handing him a plate of food while holding another close to herself.

He surveyed the plate’s contents and nodded approvingly though he wasn’t fond of most of the food items on the plate. That was another thing he didn’t like about forward women. They behaved as if they knew exactly what you wanted; and they rarely, if ever, asked you yourself. It was while he was in undergrad that he learned that many women saw it as a sign of being “a real woman” to know exactly what a man wants and be able to give it to him without instructions, feedback, or advice. “*That’s dumb*,” he’d said to a woman he was dating at the time. “*What does reading someone’s mind have to do with anything?*” She’d responded, “*It’s about connection, not telepathy. If you’re soul mates, you don’t have to say anything. You just know things.*” Incidentally, their relationship crumbled because she felt he prioritized his studies over spending time with her. *Of course I do*, he’d thought to himself at the time. *I’m a college student, for goodness sake*. But for her, his reaction was apparently a sign that their telepathic soul mate signals were out of sync. That was one of the last relationships he’d had before studying Islam. Sometimes he wondered if his internal frustration with women was what sparked him to search for deeper meaning in life. Maybe it wasn’t a humble and reserved “perfect woman” he was looking for, but a meaningful connection with a deeper part of himself.

“It’s quieter out in the hall,” Deanna said, her voice jolting him back to present tense. She was already walking toward the door before he had a chance to reply. She glanced back only once—to make sure he was following—before disappearing into the hall herself.

Jacob halted his steps. A part of him was tempted to stay right where he was. Maybe he could find a place in the MSA room to sit comfortably (preferably near the woman he’d seen earlier) and eat alone. But he knew it would be rude to stay inside the main room if the woman who’d invited him wanted to sit in the hall. As Jacob walked out into the hall himself, it was like *déjà vu*. Following a girl out of a room when he knew he didn’t like her reminded him of his experiences at his fraternity’s parties. It was unsettling to have that same feeling as a Muslim.

“So where are you from originally?” Deanna asked in between mouthfuls of food after he joined her on a couch in the hall lobby. As Deanna had predicted, the lobby area was much quieter than the MSA room, but right then, Jacob didn’t care about the quiet. His mind kept wandering back to the woman he had seen reading a book.

Jacob answered the questions as affably as he could, but he made sure that his answers were as brief as politely possible. He hated that he couldn’t get the other woman out of his head, and he mentally debated making up an excuse to go back into the room.

“We have a lot in common,” Deanna said after they had been talking for about fifteen minutes. “We should keep in touch. I’m sure you’d like to see me again.”

Jacob chuckled, again surprised by how easily he laughed with Deanna. And he couldn’t deny that he did want to see her again. Her charisma was contagious, and her physical beauty made it difficult to tear his eyes away from her. He even had to fight the urge to touch her, which was a rare struggle in his interactions with Muslim women. Maybe there was something to their meeting after all.

“Who was that sister with the book?” Jacob said when he sensed it was safe to ask.

“What sister?” Deanna voice was tight, and Jacob sensed that she didn’t appreciate the question.

“You were talking to her when you were getting our plates,” Jacob said, hoping he sounded casual. “She had on a green hijab.”

“Oh, you mean Aliyah?” Deanna contorted her face. “She *would* be reading a book when everybody else was socializing. She has zero people skills.”

“So you know her?”

“I’m her best friend. Probably her *only* friend,” Deanna added, rolling her eyes. “She’s so high maintenance.”

Jacob furrowed his brows in confusion. He knew what the term *high maintenance* meant when a man was talking about a woman, but this was the first time he’d heard it from a woman talking about another woman. “What do you mean? She’s materialistic?”

“No, not at all,” Deanna said, a glint of humor in her eyes as if enjoying a private joke. “She buys her clothes from Wal-Mart. *And* her shoes.” Deanna wrinkled her nose. “Can you imagine?”

Jacob didn’t know what to say. He shopped at Wal-Mart himself from time to time. As a grad student, he had no choice but to be frugal. But his mother, who was a stickler for quality designer brands, had bought most of his wardrobe and all of his shoes, so he was rarely faced with the need to buy anything for himself. But his mother could afford to have expensive tastes. He imagined Deanna’s friend couldn’t. Oddly, that made him like her more. He respected a person who was levelheaded enough to live according to his means, and he found this quality especially appealing in a woman.

“She’s high maintenance *emotionally*,” Deanna said, shaking her head. “She’s been Muslim for eight years, and she still has a strained relationship with her family. To me, that’s just pathetic. If you can’t find a way to have a good relationship with your own parents, then that says a lot about your Islam.”

Jacob pulled his head back in surprise. “I don’t agree with that. Some parents give their children a really hard time after they become Muslim. My mother refused to speak to me for a whole year.”

“But you’re both speaking now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I—”

“That’s my point. With Aliyah, everything is melodramatic. It’s like she can’t tie her shoelaces without my support. I swear, sometimes I feel like I’m stuck in a codependent relationship or something. It’s so exhausting.”

“Is it really that bad?” Jacob wondered if he had completely misjudged the woman. To him, she’d appeared quite self-sufficient and sensible.

Deanna fixed her gaze on Jacob with her eyebrows raised. “You can’t *begin* to imagine what I go through with that girl. I feel sorry for her fiancé.”

“She’s engaged?” Jacob hadn’t meant to sound so disappointed, but he couldn’t help it.

Deanna averted her gaze and shrugged. “Pretty much,” she said. “If the poor guy agrees to marry her after he learns she needs to be spoon-fed basic life skills.”

It wasn’t until years into his marriage to Deanna that Jacob realized that Deanna had been lying to him that day. Not only had she embellished her description of Aliyah so that Jacob would think Aliyah was a mental case, but Deanna also had concocted the whole story about the fiancé.

“Girl, you have to be proactive,” he’d overheard Deanna say on the phone one day as he was sitting in their home office grading midterm exams. He had no idea who was on the other line, and he was only half listening as he got up to close the door to drown out the conversation.

“Let me tell you how I snagged Jacob,” he heard her say just as he started to close the door. Interest piqued, he halted the motion. He heard her giggle. “He didn’t know what hit him,” she said. The door to their bedroom across the hall

was closed, but as usual, Deanna's voice was loud. Even her whispers were often intelligible. But she wasn't whispering today.

"Did I ever tell you he was interested in another sister when I met him?" There was a brief pause as Deanna listened to whoever was on the other line, then a burst of laughter sounded through the house. "I know, right? By any means necessary, girl. That's my motto when you see a man you want." A knot of apprehension tightened in Jacob's stomach as he sensed he was about to hear something he didn't like.

"But let me tell you," Deanna said, laughter in her voice. "I fixed that sister up *real* quick. People had been talking about this new Muslim brother looking for a wife, and I'm not playing when I tell you I made sure that sister hooked up with *him*, not Jacob. I didn't want that new brother for myself because I'd heard he was still getting over some old girlfriend of his. And you know, *I'm* not about to be somebody's rebound. Those relationships never worked in the *dunya*, so I sure as hell wasn't about to marry into it as a Muslim. Men always end up going back to their girlfriend. And I'm not about to be cheated on, divorced, or co-wifed if I can help it. And anyway," Deanna said jokingly, "I needed a *real* man. And that new *shahaadah* brother just wasn't it."

Jacob slowly closed the door to their home office and walked over to where his iPod was connected to a stereo system. He powered on the iPod then turned up the volume. The bass from the first song on his playlist thumped in the room, drowning out his wife's voice across the hall. Deanna was talking about how she had intentionally misled Jacob into believing that the woman he wanted to marry was already engaged to someone else, and the news disturbed Jacob more than he could stomach right then. Jacob sat on his leather swivel chair and turned himself until he was looking out the window behind his desk.

Aliyah and Matthew. The thought still left a bitter taste in his mouth. When he'd first met Matt in person months after the MSA dinner, Deanna had introduced him as Aliyah's fiancé. Even at that moment, Jacob knew something was amiss. Matt just didn't seem like Aliyah's type. Though Matt appeared to be doing well for himself, Jacob sensed that the brother wasn't ready for marriage, and definitely not to someone like Aliyah. Matt barely seemed ready to be fully Muslim. But Jacob had fought these thoughts, assuming they were coming from jealousy.

Looking out the window in his home office, Jacob clenched his jaw. It had been a stupid decision to come to Deanna's apartment for dinner about six months after they'd met. He knew it was a bad idea before he even agreed to it, but there was something about Deanna that made it difficult to stay away from her for long. In retrospect, he probably desired her more than he could rationally admit to himself as a young practicing Muslim. But at the time, he kept telling himself that their frequent conversations, which often included sexual innuendos, were inspired by their need to determine if they should get married. Besides, they would not be alone, he'd told himself as he stood outside Deanna's apartment

door. Deanna had said it would be a double date. Aliyah and Matt would be there too. Except that they weren't. Jacob knew that less than five minutes into his visit. And still he stayed.

The truth was, in the pit of his stomach, he knew exactly what he wanted that night. But he wouldn't let his mind believe it. When he'd accepted Islam, Jacob had vowed to remain celibate until marriage. He had grown tired of the meaningless relationships and one-night-stands. They had left him feeling empty and filthy inside. Even as a Christian, he knew that was no way to live. Sex was supposed to be something special shared between two people who loved each other, not a casual encounter after a drink or a celebrated conquest after a party.

When Jacob fell into that same sin with Deanna, he was ravaged with guilt. During that time, Jacob would wake up every morning feeling nauseated, dreading even looking at himself in the mirror. He tried to remind himself of Allah's mercy, but he just couldn't bring himself to believe he deserved forgiveness. But still, Jacob spent night after night in prayer, begging Allah to forgive him.

"The only solution is for us to get married," Deanna had said to him on the phone about a month later.

Jacob had recoiled at the thought. If there was one thing this experience had clarified for him, it was that he definitely didn't want Deanna as a wife. It didn't escape him that not once did Deanna say she regretted what had happened between them. It left him wondering if she'd planned the whole thing. No, he certainly couldn't deny his own culpability in their sin. But he seemed to be the only one with a heavy heart about the whole ordeal.

"Marriage isn't a solution," he told Deanna. "If anything, it'll bring more problems."

"Raising a child without a father brings more problems." Her voice was tight in offense. "And I'm sure you don't want something like that for your child."

Jacob's heart dropped. He was immediately reminded of his high school girlfriend telling him she was pregnant. Even years later, he was still unable to forgive himself for convincing her to get an abortion. After that experience, he carried protection with him everywhere. He didn't want a repeat of that agonizing ordeal. But naturally, he'd stop carrying contraceptives after he became Muslim.

A week after they spoke, upon his suggestion, Deanna went to a clinic for a pregnancy test. When she called him and said that it had come back positive, he felt as if the world was caving in on him. It was painfully ironic that he was faced with this predicament as a Muslim, and for a sin that he'd fallen into only once after his *shahaadah*.

Jacob reluctantly agreed to marry Deanna in a private ceremony at the local masjid. But just weeks after the marriage, Deanna rented out a hall at a five-star hotel and hosted a wedding party with more than three hundred guests. She said she wouldn't be able to dance so hard once the pregnancy was further along. But

it turned out that the pregnancy would never progress further along. She lost the baby about a week after the *waleemah*.

But as Jacob sat in his home office chair, his wife's words to her friend replayed in his mind. *By any means necessary, girl. That's my motto when you see a man you want.* An angry knot tightened in his chest as he wondered if the pregnancy itself was one of Deanna's "snag Jacob" routines. ...If there had been a pregnancy in the first place.

Aliyah watched as Jacob turned to leave her office after apologizing for calling her uncle to ask if he could marry her. She sensed that there was a lot Jacob wasn't saying, but she knew it wasn't her place to ask. He appeared to be under a lot of stress, and Aliyah's heart went out to him. She felt horrible for thinking it, but she wondered how he handled living with Deanna. Aliyah imagined he had to be a really patient brother. Or maybe he and Deanna were so compatible that he didn't need patience to deal with her. They certainly interacted easily whenever they did marriage workshops together.

Aliyah was walking toward her car in the faculty and staff lot when she heard someone behind her. She turned and saw Jacob walking toward his car, which apparently was in the same row as hers. She lifted a hand in a polite wave then turned back around.

"Aliyah," Jacob called out, prompting Aliyah to turn around again. He broke into a jog to catch up with her. "Can I ask a favor?"

She immediately felt on guard. But she reminded herself that he had apologized about the marriage inquiry, so this had to be about something else. "Sure," she said with more assurance than she felt.

"Deanna and I..." He looked away from Aliyah and pursed his lips, apparently trying to gather his thoughts. "Well, it hasn't been easy."

Aliyah averted her gaze. She didn't like where this was heading. She felt like she was betraying her best friend by just listening to him.

"I was just wondering if you could talk to her some time," he said, "you know, about some of the things you've studied about Islamic marriage in your classes. Maybe just a few things about the role of the husband as the leader of the household."

Aliyah shook her head, apologizing in that gesture, her expression pained. "I'm sorry, Jacob, but I don't think it's my place."

"I'm not asking you to come outright and say she's not a good wife or anything. And I'm not saying she isn't," Jacob said quickly. "Because she's a really good sister, *mashaAllah*. It's just that I don't think she'd listen to anyone else."

Aliyah lifted her palm as if to ward off any further details. "Jacob, I really don't think Deanna would listen to anything I say. And I don't mean that sarcastically. I mean that seriously." She coughed laughter, but it was due to

discomfort at the irony of the conversation, not anything humorous. “There’s nothing I could say about marriage that Deanna would listen to.”

“But as her best friend, you know what to say. She has a lot of respect for you.”

“I don’t think so,” Aliyah said apologetically. “Honestly.”

“Can you at least give it a try?”

“Okay, *insha’Allah*,” Aliyah said, mainly because the conversation was making her uncomfortable. She didn’t want to talk about this anymore. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“*JazaakAllaahukhairan*,” Jacob said, a smile of grateful relief spreading on his face. “I really appreciate it. Truly.”

“*As-salaamu’alaikum*,” Aliyah said, turning and walking toward her car again.

“*Wa’alaiku-mus-salaam*,” Jacob called out in response.

In her car, Aliyah exhaled and leaned back on the headrest. *Oh my God*, she thought to herself. *What just happened?*

The Toxic Friend

“People don’t give you room to be human,” the man said to the interviewer. “That’s one reason I never asked for help. But I don’t blame my friends and family,” he said. “They had no idea what I was going through. But if I’m honest, I didn’t fully know myself. The problem with being a mentor to troubled youth is that you’re always expected to have it all together, so your whole life ends up becoming one big inspirational pep-talk session. And then you wake up and find that you’re both mentor and troubled soul to your own life. But that’s a really lonely existence.”

“Mommy.”

At the sound of her son’s voice, Aliyah pointed the remote toward the television and powered off the screen. “I’m right here, sweetie,” she said from where she was sitting on the couch in the living room. Traces of sleep were still on Ibrahim’s face as he squinted at his mother. Aliyah opened her arms wide, and a grin tugged at one side of Ibrahim’s mouth as his padded feet moved swiftly toward her. He wrapped his arms around her as he situated himself on her lap and nuzzled his head at her neck. Aliyah couldn’t keep from smiling as she held him close.

“I’m hungry,” Ibrahim moaned.

“Alrighty, cookie monster,” Aliyah teased as she tickled him with one hand, setting off a spurt of giggles and body wriggling. “Then get off my lap.”

“No...” he whined playfully, clinging to her neck.

She smiled and shook her head as she stood, still holding him close. He wrapped his pajama-covered legs around her, and she could almost feel him smiling in triumph as she walked toward the kitchen with one of her arms holding him securely in place.

“You’re almost five,” she said as she opened the refrigerator, Ibrahim’s arms and legs still locked around her. “I can’t keep carrying you around.”

“Mmmm,” he protested.

“Okay,” she said, laughter in her voice. “But you know the rules.”

He nodded in agreement, as he always did when she gave in to his desire to be carried.

“No oatmeal,” she said. “And—”

“—no grits!” he sang out before she could finish.

Laughter bubbled in her stomach, but Aliyah suppressed it with a grin as she removed a half-gallon of milk from the refrigerator and set it on the kitchen table. The no-oatmeal, no-grits rule was originally one she’d made for herself when Ibrahim was still an infant and she was experimenting with attachment parenting. After meeting a few women in the masjid who were vocal supporters of the method, Aliyah fell in love with the concept of keeping her son physically close to her as much as possible, and she immediately went out and bought a cloth

sling for her son. When she finally got the hang of how to secure Ibrahim in the elongated cloth and tie it around her at the same time, she was surprised by how comforting and freeing it was. Not only did she have free use of her hands to do whatever she needed to do throughout the day, but she also was able to carry her son around at the same time. With the sling, she never had to worry about choosing between tending to her son and doing work or chores.

However, she hadn't been able to bring herself to cook or bake while Ibrahim was secured against her in the cloth sling. She was afraid she might accidentally burn him or cause a fire if the cloth touched the hot stove. When she'd asked for advice from the sisters in the masjid, they told her to simply adjust the sling with Ibrahim on her back if she needed extra precaution. She tried the back sling for only a few hours before she gave up and readjusted her son to the front. It was probably the most irrational feeling in the world, but Aliyah just couldn't bear being unable to look down at her son and see that he was all right. After that day, she made a rule for herself. *If you're carrying Ibrahim, you can't use the oven or the stove.* Eventually, it became the rule for Ibrahim himself if he wanted her to hold him.

A loud pounding on the front door followed by the repetitive chiming of the doorbell interrupted Aliyah's thoughts. Instinctively, she glanced at the small analog clock on the stove.

"Mommy, who's that?" Ibrahim asked as Aliyah leaned forward to set down a ceramic bowl and a box of cereal on the kitchen table. Ibrahim released himself from his mother's arms and slid into the chair next to his breakfast.

"I don't know," Aliyah said honestly. It was shortly after nine o'clock Saturday morning. She had no idea who would be visiting at this time, especially banging and ringing with so much impatient urgency. Eyebrows drawn together in confusion, Aliyah walked out the kitchen. "Wash your hands first!" she called out over her shoulder as she passed through the living room, heading toward the front door. She heard a rush of water from the kitchen sink as the pounding and doorbell ringing ceased. But before she could look through the peephole and ask who it was, the pounding and ringing picked up again.

"Who is it?" she yelled just as she got to the door.

"Aliyah!" she heard a slightly muffled voice yell. "I'm going to kill you."

Aliyah recognized the voice at once. Groaning in annoyance, she didn't even bother looking outside before she unbolted the door and pulled it open. And sure enough, Deanna stood in the doorway, looking peeved as usual.

"Girl, you know you ain't got nothing important enough going on in your life to make you too good to answer your phone." Deanna shoved past Aliyah and slipped off her shoes in the foyer, not bothering to ask if it was okay to come inside.

Aliyah started to say that after Matt and Nikki had dropped off Ibrahim last night, she had turned off her cell and home phone so that she and Ibrahim could spend time together uninterrupted this weekend. But she was stunned to silence

as she saw Younus and Thawab trailing behind their mother, bulging knapsacks on their backs and lunchboxes in their hands.

“Deanna,” Aliyah said, trying to maintain her calm, “what are you d—”

“*As-salaamu’alaikum*, Aunty Aliyah,” Younus said, his polite tone and innocent expression disarming Aliyah. He shrugged off his knapsack then set it next to his lunchbox on the foyer floor. He then kneeled and pulled off his shoes with such casual familiarity that you’d think he lived there. As usual, Thawab followed the motions of his brother, setting down his knapsack and lunchbox then kneeling and taking off his shoes too.

“Say salaams to Aunty,” Younus whispered to Thawab. Obediently, Thawab looked up at Aliyah and gave her salaams then looked back toward his brother for approval. Younus nodded, and a shadow of a smile flashed on Thawab’s face.

The scene touched a soft spot in Aliyah. She often marveled at how mature Younus was for his age. At eight years old, he was already a little man. Thawab was only five, so it would be years before he could appreciate the blessing he had in his big brother. Aliyah smiled beside herself. She imagined Younus would grow up to be like his father: helpful, patient, and paternal. Younus and Jacob already had noticeable similarities, in appearance and mannerisms.

“May-I-use-your-bathroom-please-Aunty,” Thawab said in the voice he used when he was making a conscious effort to be polite to elders.

Aliyah nodded. “Yes you may, munchkin,” she said, her tone soft with compassion. As she watched Thawab hurry to the bathroom, she couldn’t bring herself to voice her annoyance with Deanna for having stopped by unannounced. She would have to talk to Deanna later, when the children were not in earshot. She didn’t want Younus or Thawab to think she was upset or annoyed with them.

“Boy,” Deanna’s voice thundered, “get up off your lazy behind and see if your brother needs help.”

Aliyah cringed. She hated when Deanna spoke to her children like that. Younus was so well behaved and mild-mannered that Aliyah couldn’t imagine that a harsh tone like that could ever be justified with him. But she kept her thoughts to herself. Just as Deanna was the expert on marriage, she was also the expert on childrearing. Aliyah was a “pushover” and Ibrahim was “spoiled” according to Dr. Deanna Bivens, Ph.D. “You need to take some parenting classes,” Deanna often said. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Can I get the salaams at least?” Deanna said after Younus went to check on his brother. Her expression conveyed annoyance as she walked over to the couch and sat down. “You have zero social skills.”

“The general custom,” Aliyah said, her voice purposefully didactic and condescending, “in America *and* Islam, is for the person entering the home to greet those already there.” She gave Deanna a tightlipped smile. “So *wa’alaikumu salaam wa rahmatullaah*, Deeja.”

Deanna laughed and waved her hand dismissively. “Girl, come here,” she said, patting the place on the couch next to her. “I need your advice on something.”

That’s new, Aliyah thought to herself. She couldn’t imagine any topic troubling Deanna enough that it would require her input. But she would address Deanna’s dilemma later. Instead of sitting next to Deanna, Aliyah stood in front of the couch, arms crossed. “Are you all planning to stay the whole day?”

Deanna wrinkled her nose as if Aliyah had said something disgusting. “Are you crazy?” Deanna said. “I have too many things to do. I’m already running behind schedule as it is, thanks to you. But I *cannot* coddle you today. If you got issues, girl, then you’re on your own, at least for the next twenty-four hours.”

The comment stung, but Aliyah willed herself to ignore it. She needed to have thicker skin with Deanna, but it was becoming more and more difficult to withstand the constant subtle and direct insults. She knew Deanna only meant it as friendly teasing, at least Aliyah kept telling herself that she did. But it didn’t feel like friendly teasing. Aliyah hated herself for being so sensitive, but it was becoming really stressful to be around Deanna.

The inspiration Aliyah had once received from Deanna’s blunt, “no nonsense” advice was now replaced with anxiety and apprehension. Even years ago, when Aliyah was less secure about her perspective on life, Aliyah sometimes had a difficult time withstanding Deanna’s frankness and insensitivity. The most trying period of their friendship had been when Aliyah was indecisive about marrying Matt, and Deanna kept telling Aliyah that she needed to “stop being so arrogant.” Deanna kept saying, “Matt is a good Muslim, and that’s all that matters.” When Aliyah said she didn’t feel any spark or connection with Matt, Deanna had said, “Get over yourself. If you’re half the Muslim you say we all should be, then you’d have faith that Allah will work everything out. But if a good Muslim wants to marry you, you marry him. Period.”

Incidentally, Aliyah received the same advice from the local imam, who convinced her that “true believers marry for the sake of Allah, not for their *nafs*.” The imam’s words affected Aliyah so deeply that it made her reflect on her selfishness in wanting a love marriage and not a purely Islamic one. So shortly thereafter, she agreed to marry Matt, putting her trust in Allah that everything would turn out all right. She even managed to convince herself that she was excited to get married, so she’d eagerly introduced Matt to Benjamin in hopes of getting her uncle’s approval. But now that Aliyah was divorced, Deanna insisted that the marriage had fallen apart because Aliyah didn’t know how to keep a husband. “No woman in her right mind lets her husband marry another wife,” Deanna often said.

Aliyah imagined that anyone else would be grateful to have Dr. Deanna Bivens, a renowned relationship guru, as a close friend. But right then, Aliyah

didn't feel grateful. She felt used. "Then what are the lunchboxes and backpacks for?" Aliyah said to Deanna, gesturing a hand toward the now cluttered foyer.

"I said *I'm* not staying." Deanna narrowed her eyes, as if finding it difficult to comprehend Aliyah's ignorance. "I came by to drop off the boys."

A flash of rage swept through Aliyah. "No," she said, heart pounding so forcefully that she could already feel her voice shaking. "No, Deeja. I'm busy today. I can't."

"Can you just shut up and sit down?" Deanna said irritably. "I need your advice."

"No, Deeja." Aliyah felt the anxiety and frustration building. Deanna was, again, dismissing her protests, ignoring her concerns, and operating on only what Deanna wanted. "You don't need my advice. You need to *listen* to me."

"*Listen* to you?" Deanna pulled her face into a look of distaste. "That's all I do, night and day. In fact, ever since we met, that's all I've ever done, listen to you and help you. I helped you get a husband. I helped you get a job. I help pay your bills. I listen every time you stress over your stupid, childish problems. But when will you listen to *me*?"

Aliyah's eyes widened in shock and hurt. Deanna's words cut deep. Over the years, Aliyah had never asked anything from Deanna except for occasional advice. Everything else (and often against Aliyah's refusals and protests) Deanna had offered—and *insisted on*—completely on her own. Aliyah hadn't even been interested in marriage when Deanna introduced her to Matt. Aliyah had already been looking for a job when Deanna asked Jacob to speak to the college about hiring her. Aliyah had been quietly (though stressfully) living paycheck to paycheck whenever Deanna surprised her with a handwritten check. And though Aliyah couldn't deny turning to Deanna for reassurance and advice whenever she was stressed, Aliyah thought that was what friends do. Besides, Deanna herself would repeatedly tell Aliyah that she would always be there for her. Why then was Deanna throwing all this back in Aliyah's face?

One day you're going to realize that some people only help you so they can control the outcome. The words, which had been spoken by Deanna to Aliyah in an earlier conversation about Matt, took on a sudden, terrifying meaning in present tense. Aliyah shook the troubling thoughts from her head and sought refuge in Allah from *Shaytaan*. What was wrong with her? When had she begun to think so negatively of people?

No matter how irritating Deanna could be, she had a big heart and had helped Aliyah more than Aliyah could count. And for that, Aliyah owed Deanna a great deal. Aliyah didn't have the money or resources to benefit Deanna's lifestyle in any significant way, and she certainly wasn't as knowledgeable about life and marriage as Deanna was. So what was so wrong with babysitting Deanna's children at a moment's notice? What was so wrong with being overly accommodating to someone who had done so much for her? What was so wrong

with being thankful for the blessing she had in Deanna instead of being constantly annoyed?

Aliyah opened her mouth to apologize, but she saw Younus and Thawab return to the living room, their eyes full of confusion and concern as they saw the mothers' upset expressions.

"Hey!" Ibrahim said, excitement in his voice as he entered the living room and saw Younus and Thawab.

"Hey, man," Younus said, a grin spreading on his face upon seeing Ibrahim.

"Take Younus and Thawab to your room," Aliyah said. "Now, please," she added in as soft a tone as she could manage.

"Yes!" Ibrahim called out then ran out the living room. Younus and Thawab followed, no less eager as they walked swiftly behind him.

Aliyah felt heavyhearted as she saw how giddy Ibrahim was once he realized Younus and Thawab had come over. Maybe she was blind and self-centered, as Deanna often said. She had wanted Ibrahim all to herself for the weekend, but why hadn't she considered inviting Younus and Thawab over to play with him? Was this "spending quality time" priority really about Ibrahim's needs? Or was it about allaying Aliyah's guilt as the divorced, part-time mother?

"I'm really stressed about all this marriage stuff," Deanna said after the boys disappeared into Ibrahim's room.

Aliyah was immediately reminded of the brief conversation she'd had with Jacob a couple of days before, when he alluded to marital problems between him and Deanna. The mere reminder incited a headache. Aliyah felt horrible for being privy to what Deanna would certainly see as vicious betrayal for Aliyah having even listened to Jacob's concerns. *"I was just wondering if you could talk to her some time,"* Jacob had said, *"you know, about some of the things you've studied about Islamic marriage in your classes. Maybe just a few things about the role of the husband as the leader of the household."*

And I agreed, Aliyah thought regretfully. At the time, it was her way of ending the conversation and getting in her car and going home. But now she wondered if Allah would hold her accountable for making that promise. In one of her Islamic studies classes, Aliyah had learned that getting advice was the right of every Muslim, and that any agreement made, even if only verbal, was a type of *amaanah*, a sacred trust that must be fulfilled. But Aliyah didn't want to get involved in advising Deanna about marriage. It wasn't her place. But perhaps Deanna's sudden visit that morning was Allah giving Aliyah a way out. She could listen to Deanna's concerns while casually throwing in a comment about the rights of the husband in Islam.

"Tell me what I should do," Deanna said.

"Did you already talk to Jacob about your concerns?" Aliyah said as she sat down on the couch a comfortable distance from Deanna.

Deanna waved her hand dismissively. "Girl, I had to train Jacob on the basics of marriage counseling before we did workshops together. He doesn't know

anything. Anyway, I need the perspective of someone who can relate to what I'm trying to do."

Taken aback that Deanna had that much respect for her point of view, Aliyah was at a loss for words. "*There's nothing I could say about marriage that Deanna would listen to,*" Aliyah had said to Jacob. At that moment, Aliyah wished she could take those words back. She should have never said anything like that about Deanna, especially to Deanna's husband. Guilt gnawed at Aliyah, and she wondered if her words had counted as backbiting, or worse, slander. *Astaghfirullah*, she said silently, seeking Allah's forgiveness. "What is it you're trying to do?" Aliyah asked.

"It's kind of complicated actually..." Deanna appeared to be trying to gather her thoughts. "I know marriage is supposed to be really inspiring, but I'm starting to wonder if I'm going about all this the wrong way."

Aliyah nodded, but the guilt kept eating at her. How was it that she had misjudged Deanna so terribly? Was it as Deanna had said, that Aliyah had never taken a moment to actually listen to Deanna, even as Deanna listened to her all the time? *Oh my God*, Aliyah thought. *Am I that self-absorbed?*

"Be patient with yourself," Aliyah heard herself saying to Deanna. "Marriage isn't easy for anyone. It's only natural that you'll do some things wrong. Nobody's the perfect wife."

Deanna met Aliyah's gaze with her eyebrows raised, and for a moment, Aliyah thought Deanna was reflecting on what she had said. "*What?*"

The harsh tone of Deanna's voice flustered Aliyah. Had she said something wrong? "I'm just saying," Aliyah said hurriedly, "I know it's hard respecting a man as the leader of the household, especially coming from the *dunya* where everything's fifty-fifty."

"You mean it was hard for *you*?" Deanna's face was contorted as she stabbed a forefinger in the air toward Aliyah.

"No, I mean, I..." Aliyah's thoughts became jumbled as Deanna glared at her. "...I was just thinking, I know everyone struggles in their marriage, so you and Jacob can—"

"Me and Jacob?" Deanna interjected challengingly. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You said you're really stressed about this marriage stuff," Aliyah said weakly. But Deanna's icy glare was unmoving, as if waiting for further explanation. "So this is just my advice on what you and Jacob can—"

"Are you out of your mind?"

Aliyah shook her head. "Wh..."

"When I said I'm stressed about this marriage stuff," Deanna said indignantly, "I was talking about a new workshop idea I'm considering."

Oh.

"And the only reason I'm asking your advice is because you represent my ideal client," Deanna said, a sneer in her voice. "You're divorced. You're

depressed. You're broke." Deanna enumerated her points with the forefinger of one hand pressing each finger on the other. "You have no marriage prospects. And you have no idea how to fix your relationship problems on your own. So my workshop idea is to help people like you."

Aliyah stared at Deanna, speechless in shock and offense.

"That's why I need your advice." Deanna wrinkled her nose as she regarded Aliyah. "A marriage workshop is supposed to be inspirational, so I was hoping you could tell me if I'm on the right track."

An hour later Aliyah found herself mindlessly yanking the vacuum cleaner back and forth on the living room carpet. It was all she could do to quiet the fury in her chest. Ibrahim was still in his room with Younus and Thawab, and Deanna was out doing God-knows-what to save the world of pathetic divorced women like Aliyah.

"*Well, it hasn't been easy,*" Jacob had said a couple of days ago when he'd asked Aliyah's help in advising Deanna.

Well, it hasn't been easy for me either! Aliyah thought in frustration.

Deeja Marriage Guru: *It's cute when people with zero counseling credentials and zero success in their relationships try to offer experienced, married folks advice!* LOL #nicetry #DontQuitYourDayJob #ijs

Juwayriah bint Abdullah and 159 others like this. 62 comments.

It was early Sunday morning and Aliyah was sitting on her bed with her laptop balanced on her folded legs in front of her. She had finished praying *Fajr* a half hour ago and had decided to log into her Facebook account before taking a short nap until Ibrahim—and Younus and Thawab—woke up. Aliyah should have known that when Deanna had dropped off her sons Saturday morning, it was going to be an all-day affair. Deanna didn't do things halfway. If she was going to get free babysitting, she was going to milk the opportunity dry.

But Deanna leaving her sons overnight without prior agreement was something new. This certainly was not the first time that Deanna had dropped off her sons or left them in Aliyah's care without asking first, but previously, Aliyah had viewed this casualness as evidence of their close bond. "You're practically family," Deanna would often say, and Aliyah had naively been flattered. But as Aliyah sat in front of her laptop with Deanna's latest Facebook status at the top of her newsfeed—posted last night at 11:58 pm, when Aliyah had been on the verge of a headache after trying to get Deanna's sons to go to sleep—Aliyah felt nauseated.

It was at this moment that Aliyah realized that her friendship with Deanna was not based on the mutual bonds of friendship and compassion, but on the toxic bonds of manipulation and control. Aliyah could never have dropped off Ibrahim at Deanna's without calling first, and most certainly not last minute on

the day-of. Even if she'd called a week in advance, Deanna most likely would have still refused.

"I don't do babysitting," Aliyah had overheard Deanna say to someone once. At the time, Aliyah had thought nothing of it. She had assumed Deanna had meant she didn't babysit as a hobby or profession. Aliyah herself didn't "do babysitting," but since she considered Deanna her best friend and an "aunty" to her son, Aliyah was usually more than happy to babysit for Deanna if she needed it. But before this moment, Aliyah hadn't realized that this sisterly, selfless relationship was uncannily tilted in only one person's favor, Deanna's.

Aliyah had naively assumed that Deanna's help with getting the college post, Deanna's periodic monetary "*sadaqah*," and Deanna's eagerness to continuously "drop everything" and be by Aliyah's side to offer comfort and advice was coming from a place of genuine love, compassion, and mutual respect. But now that the cloud of helplessness was being lifted from Aliyah's outlook on life, she was beginning to understand why being in Deanna's presence continuously inspired anxiety and apprehension.

Aliyah was anxious and apprehensive around Deanna because Aliyah had experienced this all before—in her relationship with her mother and her eldest sister. After more than ten years of Aliyah being Muslim and continuously reaching out to her family via phone calls, postcards, and emails, they refused to speak to her because her mother and sister (the unofficial heads of household) felt that her Islamic faith and hijab "embarrassed the family." Though they attended church at least once a month and often spoke of the importance of Christian love and compassion, they weren't religious people; so their contempt for Aliyah's religious choice was genuinely rooted in social image and reputation. Before they had cut off ties with her completely, they obstinately maintained that Aliyah had no right to a lifestyle that they didn't approve of "after all we've done for you."

One day you're going to realize that some people only help you so they can control the outcome.

Yes, Deanna, Aliyah thought to herself as she closed her laptop, and that "one day" is now.

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Daughter of American converts to Islam, Umm Zakiyyah (also known by her birth name Ruby Moore), writes about the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians, and the intercultural, spiritual, and moral struggles of Muslims in America. Her work has earned praise from writers, professors, and filmmakers and has been translated into multiple languages.

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