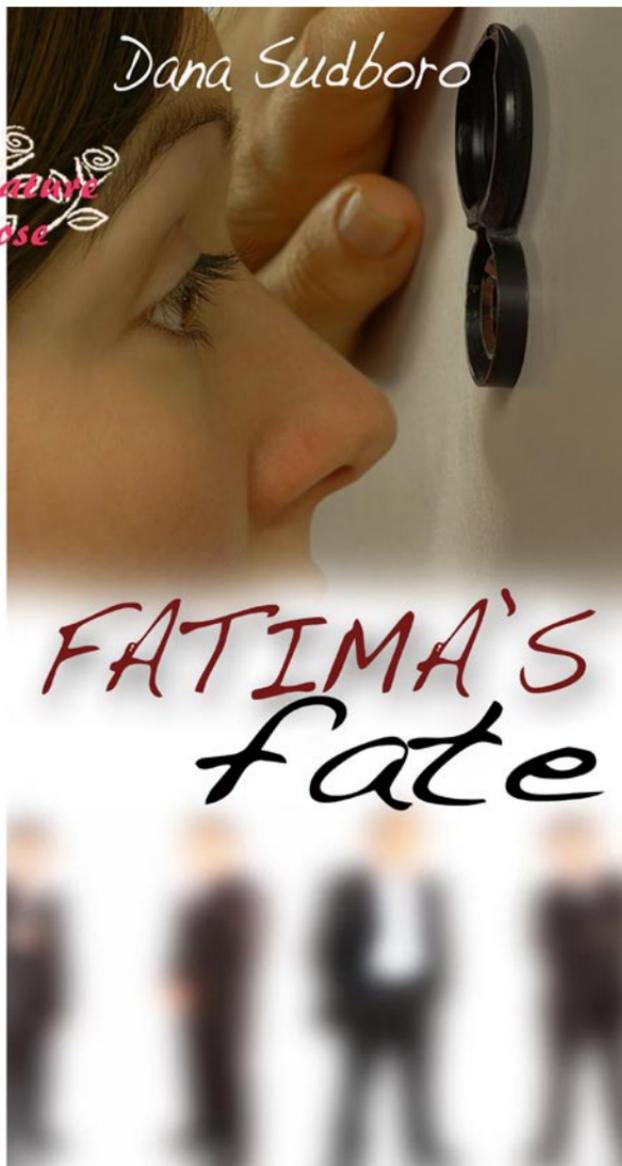


Dana Sudboro

Miniature
Rose

White Rose

FATIMA'S
fate



Fatima's Fate

by

Dana Sudboro

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Fatima's Fate

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Dedication

To my daughter and best critic, Jessi

Chapter 1—Fatima

Fatima Dede wrung her hands as she lifted her gaze and forced the words out. “Pastor, do you arrange marriages?”

“No, Mrs. Howard takes care of all wedding arrangements. But first, it’s our policy here at Midtown Chicago Ministries that I—or the associate pastor—conduct an interview with you and your future husband.” Pastor Marks smiled, his gray eyes twinkling under salt-and-pepper brows. “Is he someone I know?”

Fatima pressed invisible wrinkles from her skirt. “Forgive me, Pastor. My English is not good. What I meant was, in my country, a girl doesn’t pick her own husband. Her parents look for someone suitable. And discuss it with his parents. And the imam. And—”

Pastor Marks held up his hand. “Your English is perfectly good. I’m the one who didn’t understand. You want me to assume the role of a matchmaker and find you a Christian husband, is that right?”

“Yes, before my visa expires.”

“When’s that?”

“June first.”

“What?” He sat bolt upright, jolting his rolling chair an inch or two back from the glass-topped desk. “But that’s only four weeks away. An important matter like marriage shouldn’t be rushed

into. Surely you know that, Miss Dede. Why, even if I were in the matchmaking business, which I'm not; and even if I could find someone on such short notice, which I can't, I would never recommend—"

Fatima could hear his words, but they seemed to come from farther and farther away. A woozy weakness threatened to overcome her. She gripped the arms of the chair and willed for full consciousness to return.

Pastor Marks leaned forward. "Are you all right?"

"Please, Pastor. Hear me out. I know I'm asking the impossible. But your Jesus said that all things are possible to those who believe."

"He's your Jesus, too."

"Yes, that's what I'm counting on. I'm asking Jesus to work a miracle. Before it's too late. You see, my parents are coming to take me home."

"And you want to remain in America?"

Fatima drew a calming breath and tried to keep the desperation out of her voice. "If I go back to Mauritania, my family will force me to marry a Muslim. They've already picked him out. Paid the—I don't know what you call it here."

"Dowry. But can't you say no?"

She shook her head. "I could say no during the ceremony and the wedding wouldn't go forward. But my parents would hold me prisoner until I said yes to Tarak. Or some other man they chose. Then I would become *his* prisoner."

"Are there no Christian men to choose from?"

"That's just it. My parents would never let me choose."

"I see." He tented his fingers.

She sighed. "I've heard of converts in Mauritania. None from my people. Mostly Pulaar near the Senegal border. The police throw them in prison. Many of them die there. It's horrible. Don't

you see? I can't go back. As much as I love my country, I-I—" She hung her head in shame. "I don't want to die as a martyr."

"No one does. So let's consider the alternatives."

His voice was soft and understanding, like her father's. She nodded.

"Why can't you extend your visa to stay here longer?" he asked. "I would think that your medical services would be valuable."

"My parents would never allow it. They would inform the authorities that the only reason I wanted to stay was to marry an American citizen and gain a green card. Which is true. You see, once my residency at the hospital is finished, I'm supposed to return to Mauritania and start practicing medicine there." Fatima groaned. "I should have come to you sooner. But I loved Ibrahim. I thought he loved me and would marry me."

Pastor raised his eyebrows. "Ibrahim Buttar? But—"

"Yes, he returned to Pakistan to marry a Muslim girl. From a wealthy family. I feel like such a fool."

"He fooled me, too. His faith seemed so genuine." Pastor closed his eyes for a moment, as if in meditation. "Under the circumstances, you can consider yourself fortunate to have learned about Ibrahim's true feelings, and faith, before entering into a disastrous marriage. But that won't solve your present difficulty."

"Then you'll help me?" Fatima pleaded.

"Let me pray about it." He shook his head as she started to protest. "No, not long. Just a day, okay? Hopefully, God will give me some idea of what to do. Perhaps the name of a matchmaking service to refer you to. Or a man to introduce you to."

Hope bubbled up in her heart, dissolving some of the fear. "Oh, yes, Pastor, pray to Jesus for me. I

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want to do His will.”

“Here, write your phone number and email address on this slip of paper. And I promise. No later than 5:00 p.m. tomorrow, I’ll get back to you.”

Chapter 2—Stuart

Fatima stirred the chicken sauce, redolent with garlic and spice, and lifted the lid on the couscous. She adjusted the linen tablecloth and set a box of matches near the tapered white candles in sandalwood holders. After glancing at the clock, she rushed to the bedroom mirror to check the appearance of her long rust-and-green plaid dress, then straightened a few strands of the reddish brown hair that flowed to her shoulders. The doorbell startled her and sent her hurrying to the door.

Let him not look too old. She shuddered as she pictured the middle-aged man who took her nineteen-year-old cousin as his second wife. *But Pastor said mid-thirties.* She breathed a prayer and opened the door.

“Hi, you must be Fatima. I’m Stu. Stuart Haynes.” His right hand held out a bouquet of yellow and white flowers, yet the ring on his left hand caught her attention first.

“Come in.” Shame threatened to overwhelm her for inviting a man into her apartment. Yet he had insisted to Pastor no restaurant for this preliminary interview, no chaperone, no witnesses. He did not want his children or the members of his late wife’s family to get word of what he was considering—not until he had some idea of who she was and how well

she would fit into his life.

He entered and sniffed the air. "Mm. Smells good. What is it?"

"Moroccan Chicken. I hope it's not too foreign. But I don't know many American dishes."

"That's all right." He looked her up and down, smiling pleasantly. "I love all kinds of food."

She led him across the worn carpet and into the kitchen/dining area, marked off by badly scuffed floor tiles. She arranged the flowers in a jade green vase and added water then smiled up at him. "Would you like something to drink? Hot tea? Fruit juice? Coke?"

"You choose."

She pulled out a chair for him at the table. He raised his eyebrows and sat down. "I should hold the chair for you."

"Right, I forgot. Force of habit."

"You worked in a restaurant?"

"No, in Mauritania the women serve the men at mealtime."

"Oh."

She lit the candles self-consciously, yet with a doctor's steady fingers. Pouring hot tea in a demitasse, she handed it to him and waited for him to sample it.

He pulled out a chair and winked. "Surely, you can sit down now, can't you?"

She complied, embarrassed at how out of place the sparkling vase and fresh flowers seemed in her drab apartment. *Will he think my family poor?*

"Wo-o-oh, this is strong. And sweet." He took a second sip. "But good. I could get used to this. If you could get used to cooking steaks and hamburgers and American fare. Pastor tells me you've had a lot of experience in a lab. Mixing and measuring scientifically. So, following directions in a cookbook should be child's play."

She poured herself some tea and braved a second glance at his features. Full head of chestnut hair, none graying; dark chocolate eyes, no laugh lines; and a plain unhooked nose. For an American, he wasn't bad-looking.

"Are you always this quiet?" he asked.

"Forgive me. I've little experience dining with a man alone like this."

"Sorry, I—"

"No, don't apologize. It was kind of you to consider Pastor's...uh, invitation...on any terms. I quite understand."

Stuart furrowed his brow. "I'm not sure I do. You came to this country to study medicine, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Yet you're willing to give up a career and take care of children?"

Fatima sighed. "My original plan was to doctor women and children in Mauritania. Not marry right away, unless forced to. And certainly not have children immediately. But Jesus changed me. And that changes many things. Now I must be—how do you say it? Flexible."

He nodded. "Naturally, I'm looking for a wife who loves children—as I'm sure you must, since you dreamed of doctoring them." He set his cup down and studied it. "Sheila was a wonderful mother. And a wonderful companion. Her death meant that we've all had to adjust. Adapt. Be flexible, as you said. It hasn't been easy. I'm sure it hasn't for you either."

Her gaze fell on his ring. "How long has she been gone?"

"Eleven months." Blushing, he removed his ring and put it into his pocket. "Sorry. That wasn't very smart of me."

He must miss her terribly. "Are you hungry?"

His countenance brightened. "Yes."

As Fatima served him, she felt his gaze tracking her movements. He didn't leer as a male patient eyeing her physical charms. Rather, he seemed to study her, as her attending physician Dr. Oglethorpe did to assess her skill. *Is he looking for a wife or a cook? I'll have to be careful not to slip and call him "Doctor."* That last thought brought a smirk.

He arched an eyebrow. "Something funny?"

"Only my errant thoughts. Would you like to pray for the meal?"

Stuart bowed his head and recited a few archaic-sounding words. Then, picking up a fork, he sampled the sauce and grinned. "Delicious."

Only the clack of silverware against plates and an occasional passing car sounded. She wanted to ask the names and ages of the children, but waited, so as not to interrupt his enjoyment of the food.

He looked up. "You are actually quite lovely."

She averted her eyes.

"Which poses a problem."

She waited, not sure she had heard correctly.

"Were we to marry and you to start dressing and acting like an American, many men would notice you and be attracted."

She giggled. "You'd cover me with a burka and keep me hidden away behind walls?"

He didn't laugh as she expected, but continued to look worried. "No, no. Of course not. But what's to stop you from divorcing me and enjoying your freedom? Once you gained a green card?"

She sucked in her breath and let loose hot words of wounded pride. "Is that what you think? That my faith is phony? That I would dishonor Jesus that way? That my mother raised a daughter who would do that? Never. Not even if your children treated me like dirt. Not even if you—you—" She couldn't say it.

He reached out his hand. She retracted hers.

He pushed back his chair and looked

repentant. "I'm terribly sorry. Please forgive me. I've got a lot to learn about the differences between our cultures. No, I can see that my fears were unfounded. A well-raised lady like you would never do that. Will you accept my apology?"

She nodded, disarmed by his humility and ashamed of her outburst.

"May I have seconds?"

Relieved that he was willing to move on with the meal, taking no further note of the incident, she smiled and served him. "How old are your children?"

"Tim is almost five, Tessa is three." He flipped open a wallet and showed her a photo.

Fatima focused on the smiling redhead hugging them. *Poor darlings*. Suddenly, she had misgivings of her own. *Would they ever accept me? Or a child I bore?*

"Sorry." He flipped his wallet shut. "That wasn't too bright either."

"No, no. Your children are beautiful. Your wife, too. I'm glad you showed me."

"Please believe me. I'm ready to move on. Get married. Seek happiness again, for myself and my children."

She wondered how true that was but held her silence.

"Living alone is no fun. Pastor was right in phoning and suggesting we meet. So...uh...tell me about Africa."

Chapter 3—Barry

Fatima looked at the calendar in despair. Only twenty days remained before the wedding date Pastor had reserved. The day before her parents arrived and all hope would be gone.

No, don't think that way. Jesus will find me a husband. Maybe Barry's the one. Time to get ready.

She stepped into the shower and lathered her whole body. The doorbell sounded. *No, not now. It can't be.*

"Hold on," she yelled. "I'll be right there."

Muttering to herself about American punctuality, she towed most of the soapy water from her body, jumped into the clothes she'd hung in the bathroom, and ran to the door.

"Sorry, did I catch you at a bad moment?" asked the stranger. He was shorter than Fatima expected from Pastor's description, yet an inch or two above her five foot five. Had she met him before? Something about him seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it.

"No, give me a second to fix my hair." She rushed into the bedroom and combed her hair then straightened her dress and turned full circle to check every angle in the mirror. Satisfied, she snatched up her pocketbook and sped to rejoin him.

He brushed back a lock of blond hair and adjusted his glasses. "Wow. I've never seen you

dressed up before. You're—"

She bowed her head.

"Splendid."

"Thank you," she murmured, forgiving the early arrival.

"Would you like to go out for a pizza?"

"Pizza? But I thought—no, pizza will be fine."

He grinned. "Really? Then, let's go."

She locked the apartment and followed him down the narrow stairs. He ushered her through the foyer and to a Jeep parked at the curb—in a slot reserved for the handicapped.

She shot him a puzzled glance. "Are you—?"

He opened the door for her. "Huh?"

She hoisted herself onto the seat and searched for a polite way to phrase the question.

"Oh." He laughed. "No, there wasn't another spot available. So I just borrowed this one for a minute. I see you don't approve."

She giggled and pointed to the ticket stuck under the wiper blade. "Neither do the police."

With a groan, he snatched the ticket and stuffed it his shirt pocket. Jumping behind the wheel, he shoved the key into the ignition and paused. A grin broke through his scowl. "Small price to pay for the privilege of taking you out."

The engine roared, drowning out her reply, and they sped off. The wind whipped her hair. She reached up to hold it in place. "Please, Mister uh—I've forgotten your last name."

"Chadwick, but just call me Chad, everybody does."

"Could you slow down a bit? The wind—"

He slowed. "Sorry. How's this?"

"Yes, thank you." She searched her pocketbook but her comb wasn't there. In her haste, she had left it on the dresser. Frowning, she angled the rearview mirror and undid the damage the best she could

with her fingers.

The Jeep bounced as they entered the parking lot. Gazing at the herd of cars, she sighed and resigned herself to millions of patrons viewing her hair in disarray.

He shook his head. "Don't worry. You look fine. You'll turn the heads of all the guys and make all the girls jealous."

She couldn't help but smile at his outrageous flattery. She wondered how long it would last, if they got married. *Praise so easily won must be just as easily lost. Or is it? If only I could ask my mother. But she'll never speak to me again. Not when she learns what I've done. It'll break her heart.*

"Fatima?"

Awaking from her thoughts, she declined his arm and walked beside him toward the entrance.

He paused at the door. "Girls and guys don't hold hands in your country?"

"They don't even date." She lowered her eyes. "Not those brought up the way I was."

He opened the door. "Then why—?"

A waitress rushed up. "Table for two?"

"Yes, somewhere quiet. Right?" He glanced at Fatima. "Where we can talk."

The waitress led them to a far table, only a fraction quieter than where they'd entered, and pulled out a chair. Chad pulled out a different one and sat down. Realizing the proffered seat was for her, Fatima sat down. "Thank you."

After ordering for both of them, Chad turned to Fatima. "I don't understand. If you were brought up not to date, why did you accept my invitation?"

"Didn't Pastor explain?"

"Pastor who? Explain what?"

She gaped at him. Pressing her fingers to her temples, she tried to think. *What am I not understanding?* She looked at him apologetically.

"Forgive me, English is my third language. I don't always understand. Could we start at the beginning and go slowly?"

"Sure." He stopped arranging his napkin and met her gaze.

"Why did you come to my apartment this evening?"

"To ask you out. I've been meaning to for a long time, but lacked the courage until now."

"Then, Pastor Marks didn't speak to you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know a Pastor Marks."

"Oh, no!" she cried, leaping from her chair.

He stared at her wide-eyed. "What's the matter?"

"You're not Barry."

"No, I told you, I'm Chad—Clarence W. Chadwick. Who's Barry?"

She made a move toward the exit. "I've got to get back to the apartment. Barry's coming to pick me up. It's all been arranged."

"Wait." Chad tossed money on the table and caught up with her. "I'll drive."

She looked at him helplessly, thought of the money she was costing him—first the parking ticket and now the pizza—and felt like the world's worst blunderer.

"Come on." He took her arm and led her through the maze of tables, chairs, and customers. "I'll get you there quicker than a taxi. We can go out for pizza some other time."

As Chad drove, Fatima studied his calm expression. His patience impressed her. In a similar situation, her father would have thrown a fit. He hated losing money. Most of all, he hated losing control. Yet Chad seemed to take it all in stride.

He shot her a quick glance and grinned. "You still don't recognize me, do you?"

She shook her head.

"I work at the hospital, in the human resources office."

Fatima gasped. "Now I remember. You came up to Susan's desk and helped her find my records. But that was weeks ago."

"I waved to you yesterday. Don't you remember? And you smiled back. That gave me courage."

"But how—oh, I get it. You found my address in the computer."

"Wasn't very ethical, was it?"

Flattered, she shook her head and smiled. Then reality hit. *He knows nothing about my circumstances. Marriage is far from his mind. And who knows what religion he practices? Not all Americans are Christian.*

"What's the matter?" Chad asked as he stopped in front of her apartment building.

"I've got to run," she blurted. "Thanks for the ride."

She sped through the foyer and took the stairs two steps at a time. Arriving out of breath at apartment twenty-seven, she found a note wedged between the door and frame. With sinking spirits she unfolded it and read:

Miss Dede,

I rang the bell, knocked, and waited ten minutes. Did something come up? Yet what could be more urgent than the situation Pastor Marks described? Don't bother to explain. I've changed my mind.

Barry

She crumpled the note and thumped her head against the door in frustration. Someone unbolted a door. Fatima straightened her posture and fished in her pocketbook for her key.

A middle-aged man with hairy armpits frowned at her from apartment thirty-one. "Oh, it's you. Lose

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your key?"

Shaking her head, she opened the door and fled inside.

Chapter 4—Father

Fatima glanced at the stamp and slit the letter open. Onionskin fell out bearing her father's fine Arabic calligraphy and choppy French scrawl.

Praise be to Allah the All-knowing, All-wise, and Compassionate. His angels fall prostrate before him. Man is dust in his sight.

Peace, my beloved daughter. May this missive find you in good health and eager readiness for the blessed days to come: the completion of your training and your marriage. I am humble in gratitude to Allah for the success he has given you and the fine husband he has selected. A curse on anyone who would raise an opposing hand to what Allah has willed.

Good news. On our trip home, your beloved Tarak and his parents will join us in Paris for a week of sightseeing and shopping. That way you and he can get better acquainted. Plus, you can purchase all the things you've been too busy to shop for in America.

Your brothers, Jibril and Mokhtar, greet you. Your sister, Maryam, greets you. Be assured of our fondest regards.

Allah preserve you!

Your proud and thankful father

Panic gripped Fatima. Tarak coming to meet her in Paris only to learn she was already married? Such humiliation for him and his parents was unthinkable. What should she do to prevent it?

Clasping the letter to her breast, she willed her breathing to slow down, then rose and walked to the phone.

"I'm sorry, Pastor Marks is out of the office," said the church secretary. "Do you want to leave a message?"

"Is it possible to see him today?"

"Let me check. Yes, his one-thirty appointment canceled. Would you like me to pencil you in for that time?"

"Oh yes, please."

Sunshine filtered through the Chicago haze and tinted office windows to highlight the remaining days of May on the desk calendar.

Fatima lifted her gaze from the calendar to the pastor's kind eyes. "Please forgive me for bothering you so much. You have already spent far too much time on my case. I'll never be able to thank you enough."

Pastor Marks shook his head. "No bother at all. I consider it a joy and a privilege to help. I'm sorry it didn't work out with Barry, but don't despair."

"I won't."

"And don't discount Stuart. He's still very much interested."

Fatima did her best to smile. She didn't want to appear distressed by this news. Not if Stuart was fated to become her husband in seventeen days.

Lord, if he's Your choice, so be it. I promise to be the best wife I can with Your help. And the best mother to his children.

"However," Pastor continued, "I told him that

any future meetings are up to you and him to arrange between yourselves. And next time, to show his seriousness, he must take you somewhere public. Perhaps with his children.”

Her smile increased. “Thank you, Pastor.”

“You’re welcome. Now, concerning a third candidate.” He coughed. “Please realize that matchmaking is new to me. The Bible School didn’t offer any courses in it. So it’s taking me longer than we hoped. But I’m phoning various pastors. Hopefully, I’ll find another man for you in a couple of days. Are you sure you don’t want your photo and bio to go out on the Internet?”

“Yes, the Internet cafés in Nouakchott are full of young adults. Including my friends. Someone who knows me would be sure to notice. But that’s not why I’m here.” She looked down at her clasped hands. “Another problem has come up.”

Pastor’s eyes twinkled. “Fire away. That’s what I’m here for.”

“My father just informed me that my fiancé and his parents are coming to Paris to meet us. Somehow, I’ve got to stop them. Spare them the humiliation of coming for a bride who is already married.”

“What would happen if you phoned your fiancé and told him that you no longer wished to marry him?”

She sighed. “He or his parents would protest to my parents, and my father would take immediate action.”

“What kind of action?”

“Come here and demand an explanation. Try to convince me to marry Tarak. Yank me out of the country, if I didn’t listen to reason.”

Pastor knit his brows. “Can he do that?”

“He can make problems for me with the U.S.C.I.S. and get my visa revoked.” She shuddered

at the thought of her father's ruthlessness in enforcing his will, remembering the only time her brother Jibril had tested it. "Or he can have some toughs grab me and keep me confined somewhere until my visa expires. Either way, I would have no opportunity to marry a Christian before leaving the country."

"What would happen if you informed him of your conversion?"

"That would be even worse. He'd have me yanked off the streets immediately and hidden away until he could get here. Then he'd do everything possible to get me to renounce my faith."

"Hmm." Pastor tented his fingers and tapped his thumbs. "We've got to get you married to a Christian before your father suspects a thing—preferably to an American citizen whose rights would be respected by your father and his associates."

"Yes, but what do I do about Tarak?"

"Inform him of your marriage after the fact, but soon enough to stop him from coming to Paris to meet you. When are he and his parents planning to leave Mauritania?"

Fatima sighed. "I don't know, but probably no sooner than my parents. May twenty-ninth."

"If you phoned the twenty-eighth, could you be sure of reaching Tarak?"

"Reasonably sure. Either him or his parents."

"What say we move the wedding date to the twenty-seventh? That would give you two days to call off Tarak's trip."

"You're right, Pastor." She looked at him in despair. "But that gives me two less days to find a husband."

Pastor chuckled. "Time is no obstacle when it comes to God and His miracles. He invented time, created it, masters over it."

Fatima caught his infectious confidence and

smiled. “Yes, as long as we’re believing for a miracle, two days won’t make any difference.”

“That’s the spirit.” Pastor punched his intercom and spoke to his secretary. After scribbling something on his calendar, he looked up and grinned. “All set. You’ll be married on May twenty-seventh, Lord willing.”

Chapter 5—Chad

A man in a gray uniform approached the nursing station carrying flowers. Fatima nudged by him and glanced at her clipboard.

“Miss Dede,” Nurse Welker called out. “Could I speak with you?”

Fatima came to the counter. “Yes?”

“Please tell your boyfriend to send flowers to your residence. Not here. Deliveries in the hospital are for patients.”

“But I don't have a boyfriend.”

The nurse thrust the burgundy bouquet into her hand. “You do now.”

“I don't understand.”

Frowning, the nurse came around the counter and pulled out a card. She held it in front of Fatima's nose. “Read it.”

Fatima,

When I saw these, I thought of your beautiful hair. When I smelled them, I thought of your exotic perfume. If I knew your pastor, I'd ask him to arrange a meeting. Won't you accept these as a proper introduction and have dinner with me at the Marrakesh? Friday, 7:00 p.m. I'll pick you up. Please say yes, even though my name's not Barry.

Hopefully,

Chad

Fatima blushed. "Sorry, I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

Nurse Welker's frown disappeared, giving way to a whimsical smile. "Don't be too sorry. They're beautiful."

"Where can I keep them until I've finished my rounds?"

"I'll keep them here until you return for them."

Fatima entered the human resources office and approached Susan's desk. Deserted.

"Susan's out," called a lanky brunette. "May I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Chadwick."

"Concerning?"

"A personal matter."

The brunette scowled. "Your name?"

"Fatima Dede."

The brunette pivoted and strode away, stiletto pumps clacking.

A minute later, Chad rushed up, smiling broadly. His wire frames balanced precariously on his nose, as if he had thrust them on in a hurry. "What a delightful surprise. Does this mean you'll have dinner with me Friday?"

"We have to talk. In private."

"Oh no, did I break another rule of etiquette? I get more tickets for that than for parking." He motioned with his arm. "Come sit at my desk and cross-examine me."

What a pleasant, unassuming guy he is.

She declined his desk chair but accepted the smaller one he pulled up. She composed herself and then looked him in the eye. "Mr. Chadwick—"

"Chad, please."

"Chad, I'm flattered by your flowers and won't ever forget them."

He chuckled. "In that case, I'll send you many more."

"But before I can consider going to dinner with you, I must ask you some questions."

His blue eyes twinkled. "Sure, ask away."

"What way do you follow?"

"Huh? Could you clarify the question?"

"Do you follow Mohammed? Or Buddha? Or Krishna? Or Jesus? What path?"

His smile brightened. "I follow Jesus just like you."

"How do you know I follow Jesus?"

"I snooped in your records, remember?" He chuckled again. "Besides, the day you came in to change the entry on your emergency card, everyone was buzzing about it. It's not often a Muslim changes her religion."

Fatima sucked in her breath. "You mean everyone in the office knows?"

"Don't worry. We have freedom of religion in this country."

But what if the news were to leak out?

He gave her an odd look. "If you didn't want people to know, why did you change the entry?"

"I didn't want to be buried as a Muslim."

He laughed. "You're a funny girl, you know that? No one thinks about death at our age."

"There are many things I think about now that I never thought about before."

"So, is that it? Now that you know I'm a Christian, will you go out with me?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what?" He waggled his eyebrows. "Do you want to know my income, my lineage, my political party?"

She shook her head. "No, not that it matters too much, I'm just curious. Are you an American citizen?"

“True red, white, and blue, flag-waving patriot. So, do I pass? Will you have dinner with me at the Marrakesh?”

“Yes.”

“Great. I’ve made reservations. I’ll pick you up Friday, seven o’clock. Now, when Friday evening comes, wait until I get there, even if I’m late. Don’t take off with Barry or anyone else. Promise?”

She laughed. “I promise.”

Chapter 6—Amir

After peering through the peephole, Fatima opened the door and blinked. *He's so young. Handsome. Like what's-his-name in Châteauevallon.*

Even in the hallway's dim light, his teeth gleamed. "Hi. You must be Fatima."

She nodded.

He stood there bronzed and gorgeous, like a five-foot-five Adonis, only in a sleek black Armani suit that matched his hair. "I'm Amir. You ready to party?"

"Huh? But I thought it was an art show."

"It is. Lots of artists, critics, buyers, and freeloaders like us." He jiggled his car keys. "Come on, we're late."

She followed him down the stairs. "Freeloaders?"

"Yeah, to snarf down the free food." He pointed his remote and a sleek, low-slung car beeped.

She fell into the bucket seat and giggled. "Feels like I'm sitting on the ground."

"Wait 'til I take off. You'll feel like you're at Indianapolis."

"Where?"

Revvng the engine, he squealed the tires and sailed toward the stop sign at full tilt. Braking hard, he said, "The race track two hundred miles from here. What's the matter? You've never closed the

books and gone exploring?"

She gripped the seat as he took the next turn. "Fourth-year residents don't have time for that."

"Neither do corporate executives. Or so my father says. But, if you're smart, you make time."

Amir's attitude caused her to wonder whether he was ready to contemplate marriage. "Did Pastor Marks explain my situation?"

"N'aie pas peur, ma chère, je suis au courant."

His French disquieted her even more, not the words, but the insouciant way he flung them out. If he knew all about her situation, how could he be so...flippant? How could he expect her not to worry? He sounded more like an international playboy than a mature Christian ready to settle down. Dismissing her qualms, she asked, "Do you like modern art?"

"No, but I like to mix with the people who do. You know, the politicians, pseudo-intellectuals, bored bourgeois, and self-styled geniuses."

She laughed. "Doesn't sound like you like modern-art lovers either."

"Quite the contrary, I fit right in."

She found a handle and gripped it. "So, which of those categories do you fit in?"

He grinned. "I'm not a politician. That's for sure. Nor a genius. I suppose I'm a tongue-in-cheek intellectual and not-too-bored bourgeois."

She pondered that description. Obviously, Amir enjoyed the money his father made but gave no thought to making it himself.

Am I willing to sacrifice my own ambitions to marry someone with no ambition at all? Or would he allow me to pursue my career? She frowned. And make more money for him to spend.

The car decelerated and cornered sharply then descended into a shadowy pit. Fatima caught her breath and watched Amir pull a card from the machine. He parked, jumped out, and appeared at

her side of the car before she'd collected her wits. Opening the door, he offered his arm, for which she was grateful. It took her wobbly legs a while to adjust.

He grinned. "I see you're not used to sports cars."

"Nor speed."

"You crossed the Atlantic in a jet, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"That was ten times as fast."

And ten times safer.

Inside the art gallery, Fatima surveyed the affluent crowd and felt underdressed in her off-the-rack Macy's dress.

Amir passed her a canapé. "Try this."

She tasted and raised her eyebrows. "Mm, shrimp."

"Amir," hailed a short balding man, eyeing Fatima. "Introduce me to your friend."

"Mustapha, this is Fatima Dede, a resident doctor. Fatima, meet Mustapha Nouri, a commodities dealer and buddy of mine."

Mustapha reached out his hand. Not wanting to appear impolite, Fatima offered hers. He lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them. "Delighted to make your acquaintance. What do you think of the Biederman?"

Embarrassed, Fatima tugged her hand free. "The what?"

He pointed. "The painting."

"Uh." Fatima studied it. "All I see is a jumble of colors. Reminds me of a Mauritanian fabric boutique. What do you see?"

"A risky commodity whose value might skyrocket or plummet. Depending on the whim of collectors and critics. Impossible to predict."

"So, art is not one of the commodities you invest in?"

“No, but I’ve hung a couple of paintings in my home. To impress people.”

She laughed. “Does it work?”

Mustapha leaned forward and spoke in silky tones. “You’ll have to come over and tell me.”

Fatima backed away a fraction, offended by his breath and suggestion.

“Hey,” Amir protested, “find your own girl.” He nudged her to move on.

Two more patrons greeted them as they made their way through the gallery, sampling more food than art.

Did he come here to show me off? Or impress me with his friends? Or what? He certainly takes no interest in the paintings.

Amir offered her a glass of wine.

“No, thank you.” She looked at him puzzled. “Do people at your church drink?”

“Some do, some don’t. Why?” He gave her a strange look. “You don’t stick to your Muslim customs, do you?”

She thought it over. “I guess I do in some areas. Like no pork or alcohol.”

“Why? Most of my Muslim friends eat and drink what they want. At least in this country they do.”

Fatima nodded and said nothing, but Amir’s nonchalance bothered her. *He seems to approve of Muslims ignoring the precepts of their religion. How does he feel about Christians doing the same? I want to marry a believer with convictions.*

“Let’s go for a drive,” he said. “I can see you’re not enjoying this.”

Although he had misunderstood her frown, she didn’t demur. He led her through the crowd and out the door. Soon, they were cruising by Lake Michigan, listening to soft jazz on the radio. She relaxed.

The stream of white headlights fascinated her.

"Where are we headed? Indianapolis?"

"Not that far. You'll see."

Suddenly, he maneuvered right, left, left—so many turns that her head was spinning when he came to a halt. She caught her breath and waited for the world to stop moving. It didn't. Yachts rocked in unison in front of her. "Is one of them yours?"

"Not yet. I'm working on it."

Working on your dad? Or on the job?

He reached out, laid his arm on the back of her seat. "Comfy?"

"Mm," she said noncommittally, uneasy about the closeness of his arm.

"Good," he purred and clasped her shoulder.

She leaned forward and turned to face him. "Amir!"

He turned his free hand palm up in a gesture of innocence. "What's the matter?"

"We're not married yet. Not even engaged."

He lowered his eyelids and softened his voice. "There's no time for a proper engagement. Hardly any time to see if we're compatible. Don't you want to?"

"Want to what?"

"Make sure we're compatible."

Suddenly afraid, she shook her head and searched for her voice. "Please take me home."

He withdrew his arm and scowled. "How do you expect to reel in a husband if you're unwilling to toss out any bait?"

Bait? Unsure of his meaning but certain of her desire to get home, she tried again. "Please, Amir. If you have any respect for me, take me home."

An expression of contempt contorted his features. "You'll be home in Mauritania in no time. Married to your parents' pet Muslim. Cooking. Cleaning. Changing diapers."

Hot indignation brought a retort to mind, but

she held it back.

“Back where you belong,” he spit out. “With the ayatollahs of sexual repression.”

Staring straight forward, she walled her mind against his words and willed time to speed forward. Yet she could not escape the hurt of his hostility.

A familiar tree trunk came into view. She bolted from the car, ran to the apartment building, and heaved open the heavy door. As she mounted the stairs, the door clicked shut and muffled the sounds of Amir’s car roaring off, but nothing could silence his voice in her head.

Chapter 7—Dilemma

Fatima stopped in the corridor outside the auditorium and answered her cell phone.

“Fatima? This is Stuart. We’re having a special birthday meal for Timmy. Tomorrow evening, six o’clock. The grandparents will be there. It’ll be a great chance for you to meet everybody. Will you come?”

“Tomorrow, Friday?” Her heart sank.

“Yes, I know, I didn’t give you much warning. Is that a problem?”

Fatima returned a fellow resident’s wave. *Chad’s supposed to take me to dinner. But he knows nothing of my predicament. Stuart does and wants to take the second step: introduce me to his children and parents. How can I let this opportunity slip? Maybe I can postpone my dinner with Chad.*

“Fatima, are you there?” Stuart sounded unsure of himself and hurt.

She gripped the cell phone and searched for words. “Ooh, I’d really like to go. But I have a conflict of schedule. Can you give me until tonight to work things out?”

“You mean you’re on duty at the hospital?”

Before knowing Jesus, Fatima would have seized this convenient lie, but now her conscience stopped her. “No, it’s not that. I don’t want to go into detail. Please, Stuart. Give me some time to adjust

my schedule and phone you back. Okay?"

"Sure, sure. But keep one thing in mind. There won't be another opportunity quite like this. To meet the family and see how you fit in. Before your deadline—our deadline—to reach a proper decision on marriage. You understand that, don't you?"

A sparrow in the hand is better than a pheasant on the wing. Fatima resigned herself to her fate. "You're right. I'll be there. No matter what."

"Good. You've made the right decision. Which proves you're a sensible woman." He chuckled. "Just the kind I'm looking for."

"Thank you." Fatima fought down the temptation to call the whole thing off and run. Run to the mountains, the desert, the remotest spot in America, and hide. She shivered. *Immigration agents would catch up with me eventually. And then my fate would be far worse.*

Stuart cleared his throat. "By the way, it's the American custom to give presents on birthdays. Especially to children. So I'll write your name on one of the gifts I picked out. Okay? That will go a long way in winning Tim's heart."

"No, don't do that. I'll get him something."

"Great. I appreciate your sacrifice. You know, it hasn't been easy for me either. Talking things over with my children. Preparing them for change."

Gratitude warmed her heart. "I appreciate that, Stuart. Now, please. I've got attend my seminar. I'm already late."

"Just one more thing. I'll pick you up at five-thirty tomorrow evening, okay?"

"Yes. Five-thirty. Bye."

Fatima mouthed a silent apology to the guest lecturer and slid into the nearest seat. Try as she might, she couldn't track the gynecologist's words. They flowed by her like elevator music, lost amid her troubled thoughts.

You dummy. You just cancelled dinner with the only man who ever sent you flowers. And for what? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life taking care of someone else's children? Competing with a dead wife for his affections?

But what else could she do? She had to buy time. Time to consider her options before throwing one away. If she'd said no, Stuart wouldn't give her another thought. At least with Chad, there was a chance of rescheduling.

I hope.

But what could she tell him? "Sorry, something came up." What came up? An emergency at the hospital?

Am I going to start lying again? And what if he were to find out—? No, I've got to think of something halfway true that won't hurt his feelings.

By the end of the lecture, Fatima had worked out a plan. She sped to the HR office and stopped at Susan's desk. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Chadwick."

"He's in a meeting. Is it something I can help you with?"

"No, it's...personal." Susan's eyes widened, and Fatima blushed as she continued. "Will the meeting be over soon?"

Susan glanced at her watch. "In thirty or forty minutes perhaps. But there's no guarantee he'll come back here. He might go straight to lunch."

Fatima looked around and spotted a chair. "I'll wait."

She sat down on the hard chair and tried to remember some of the points of the lecture, but her mind couldn't stay focused.

Susan worked at her keyboard, glancing in Fatima's direction from time to time, but said nothing. An hour went by. Susan opened a drawer and pulled out a brown paper bag. "Care for a turkey sandwich? I've got two."

“No, thank you.”

“How about an apple?”

Fatima shook her head yet marveled at the invitation. In Mauritania, one did not eat in front of a stranger without offering something, but this was the first time anyone in America had shown such hospitality.

“How long have you known Chad?” Susan asked.

“A week.”

Susan nodded and popped open a can of Coke. “I’ve known him for years. He’s a nice guy. Kind. Considerate.”

Why is she telling me this?

Chad walked in. “Well, hello. Did you come to see me?”

Susan grinned. “She’s waited more than an hour.”

Banishing her confusion over Susan’s motives, Fatima stood and faced him. “Could we speak in private?”

“Sure.” He glanced at Susan’s sandwich. “Have you eaten?”

“No.”

With an inviting smile, Chad gestured toward the door. “Good. Let’s go get that pizza we left cooling.”

“But—”

“No buts. If you came to call off our dinner tomorrow, the least you can do is have lunch with me now.”

Speechless, she accepted his arm—self-consciously at first—and followed him to his Jeep. To her surprise, his guiding touch put her at ease and made her feel pampered.

He settled her into the passenger seat and smiled at her as he walked to the driver’s side. He climbed in and set the Jeep in motion. “So, why are you calling off our date?”

"I'm not. Just postponing it." She watched his blond hair shimmer in the breeze. "If you'll let me."

"Really? Then let's go fishing. Saturday morning. Early."

"Fishing?" she squeaked, picturing twenty men on a beach struggling to haul in a long net.

"Yeah, it'll be fun. No, don't look like that. I'll bait the hook for you, if you're squeamish."

"Oh, you mean one little fish at a time?" She giggled. "Sure, if you show me how."

"Sure, I'll share all my fishing secrets that avid anglers would pay big bucks for."

Fatima looked at him puzzled. "Anglers?"

"Yeah, the sports enthusiasts who fish with angle worms—we've got lots of angles." His comic grin told her there was a joke in there somewhere.

She reran his sentence in her mind. "I don't get it—who's got the angles—the worms or the fishermen?"

He laughed as if she'd told a better joke than his, so she gave up trying to figure it out.

He pulled into the parking lot and set the brake. "We need to get an early start, because it will take us an hour and a half to get to the lake. Is four in the morning too early for you?"

She wondered why it would take so long to reach Lake Michigan, but didn't want to ask another stupid question. "No, four will be fine."

He led her to the door, but paused before opening it. "So, what came up to cancel our date tomorrow?"

"A little boy's birthday. Please don't ask me to explain."

He laughed and opened the door. "Beaten out by a little boy. My competition is getting younger and younger."

Relieved, she relaxed and discovered she was hungry.

Chapter 8—Lunch

Fatima watched Chad take the first bite of pizza and imitated his style. She blew on a wedge, bit off a chunk, and pulled the remainder away. Or tried to. A rope bridge of stringy cheese spanned the gap. Embarrassed, she leaned over her plate and set the remnant down. Then, using only her right hand, she severed the strings.

He grinned. “Never eaten pizza before?”

She shook her head and waited until her mouth was empty to reply. “I’ve never eaten with my left hand either. I guess I’d better learn.”

“Or use a knife and fork.” He demonstrated with the next bite and winked. “With pizza anything goes.”

Fatima scanned the room and spotted a toddler stuffing a tomato sauce-covered fist into her mouth. Nearby a hefty, tattooed man licked his fingers. And a white-haired gentleman cut his wife’s pizza into tiny morsels. She laughed. “You’re right.”

“So eat hearty and enjoy. Nobody’s watching to see how messy you get.”

She succeeded in taking the next bite without strings attached and relaxed, savoring the warm cheese. “Delicious. Is pizza hard to make?”

“You mean from scratch? I don’t know. No one I know does it. Making the bread dough must be complicated.” He shot her a quizzical look. “Why? Is

cooking your hobby?"

"Hobby?"

"What you do for fun."

She shook her head. "Fun or work, I've cooked all my life."

"But as a doctor you'll be too busy."

"I'm busy now as a resident. Busier than most doctors. But I still cook all my meals."

"Really? When do you take time to relax?"

His simple caring question threatened to undo her. Unremitting deadlines had kept her scrambling since she arrived in America. Chad was the first to express any concern for the load she carried. She did her best to smile and give a nonchalant answer, lest the spilling of emotion release all those dammed up. "I'm relaxing right now."

"Good. I hope to give you many opportunities to get away from the grind and enjoy life."

Afraid to reveal more, she turned the question back on him. "So, what do you do to enjoy life?"

"Besides fish, you mean? I like to hike in the woods, go camping, explore the countryside, and don't laugh—" He blushed.

"Go ahead, say it. I won't laugh."

"Watch birds."

She cocked her head. "Watch them do what?"

"Fly. Build their nests. Feed their babies."

"Why?"

"Because they're marvels of God's creation. Just think of the centuries men dreamed of flying before they learned how to do it. Yet birds do it instinctively. And that's not the only miracle. They can navigate by the sun, or the magnetic field of the earth, in ways scientists have yet to figure out. And their colors. Aren't they beautiful? As Jesus said, they don't have to spin threads or weave fabrics to dress beautifully."

She listened with fascination. "You see God

everywhere.”

“Especially outdoors. I don’t just *see* His wonders, but hear and smell and taste them, too.”

“Taste?”

“Sure, the tanginess of a blade of grass. The sweetness of a wild blackberry. The saltiness of an ocean breeze.”

“Which ocean?” Fatima recalled wading in the Atlantic, her father holding her hand while her mother nursed Jibril.

“Atlantic. I was seven the first time. Ran with the sandpipers. Dodged the waves.”

She wiggled her toes inside her sandals. *We might have been playing on two sides of the same ocean. At the same moment.*

Their gazes met. He smiled. “What are you thinking?”

Too timid to tell, she asked, “You mean the little birds that run to find food in the wave’s wake? Then flee when the next wave advances?”

“Yep. When I first saw I them, I thought they were playing a game. So, I ran up to join them.”

“So did I,” she said, suddenly nostalgic for the carefree, wonder-filled days of childhood.

“What’s the matter?”

Fatima sighed. “The world seemed so much safer then. Idyllic.”

“Yeah. But we can live in such a world again.”

She nodded. “When we go to heaven.”

“Then, too. But I was thinking of child-raising. Providing beautiful experiences for kids to enjoy. Seeing the world through their eyes.”

“Oh.” She shot a worried glance at her watch. “That’s right. I’ve got to find a present for a five-year-old boy.”

“Why don’t I help you?” He waved for the waiter.

“But—”

“No buts,” he told her for the second time that

day. "You're a busy woman, and this will cut your shopping time in half. Okay?"

She nodded. *How easy this man would be to live with.*

"Could you give us a doggy bag?" he asked the waiter then turned back to her. "What's this five-year-old's name?"

"Tim."

"And what does Tim like to do?"

"I have no idea."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hmm. Beaten out by a five-year-old you hardly know. Please don't explain. My ego couldn't stand it."

She giggled. "I think you Americans call that 'fishing for a compliment.'"

"Didn't work, eh?"

Fatima bowed her head and spoke softly, not wanting to be overheard. "You are the kindest man I've ever met."

He gaped. The waiter returned, but Chad didn't seem to notice until the carton was thrust in front of his nose. "Thank you." He adjusted his spectacles and rose. "Shall we go shopping? I'll call the office and alert them of my delay getting back."

Chapter 9—Tim

Fatima followed Stuart into the foyer of his brick bungalow and waited shyly for him to introduce her.

“Dad, this is the lady I was telling you about, Fatima Dede. Fatima, meet my father, Thornton Haynes”

She offered her hand. “How do you do, sir?”

He grasped it solidly. “You speak with an accent I can’t place.”

“Hassaniya.” She tugged her hand free.

“That’s the Arabic dialect spoken in Mauritania,” Stuart said.

Thornton glanced at his son. “Where?”

“West Africa, south of Morocco.”

Thornton favored Fatima with a broad smile. “Ah, so what brings you to this country?”

Didn’t Stuart tell him anything? “Your excellent medical school.”

His eyes narrowed. “You hope to become a doctor?”

“Yes, our country needs more women doctors.”

“Why more women?”

“So that women patients can receive the same quality of care as the men.” His puzzled expression showed that she would have to explain. “Husbands are reluctant to have men examine their wives, so a woman is often forced to go to a poorly trained nurse

or midwife.”

“She can't choose her own doctor?”

Fatima shook her head.

“So, when your training is complete, you'll return to Mauritania?”

A middle-aged lady in an apron came up, glanced inquisitively at Fatima, and laid a hand on Thornton's shoulder. “Sweetheart, our grandson is waiting for his party to begin.”

Stuart stepped forward. “Mom, say hello to Fatima Dede, our special guest this evening. Fatima, this is my mom, Janice Haynes.”

After exchanging greetings, Fatima followed the Hayneses into the living room. An elderly gentleman removed a small boy from his lap and rose from the sofa. The lady beside him drew a small girl closer and remained seated.

Stuart cleared his throat. “Lou and Lois Brockmeyer, this is my friend, Fatima Dede.” They gave her a slight nod. “Fatima, these are Tim and Tessa's other grandparents.”

Your late wife's parents? Why didn't you warn me? She forced a smile and a slight curtsy. “I'm honored to meet you.”

Tim ran up, tilted his head back, and reached out chubby fingers. “Is that for me?”

Janice took the brightly wrapped package from Fatima's hands. “Yes, it is, sweetie, but now is not the time to open it. I'll put it away until later.” She left the room.

Diverted only a second, Tim turned back to Fatima and reached out his arms. “Pick me up.”

“Now, Timmy,” Mrs. Brockmeyer scolded as Fatima lifted him, “what do you say?”

“Please,” Tim answered obediently. Eyes wide, he reached out and touched Fatima's cheek.

She smiled. “What a handsome boy you are.”

“I'm five.” He showed her four fingers.

“One more,” Mrs. Brockmeyer said, holding back the squirming Tessa.

Fatima cuddled Tim close. “Yes, that’s an important age to be.”

“I’m a big boy now. I can go to school.”

Stuart chuckled. “That’s my son. Eager for the next challenge.”

Thornton laid a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Let’s hope he keeps that positive outlook after school begins.”

Janice returned, no longer wearing her apron. “Come to the table, folks. The birthday meal is ready.”

Mrs. Brockmeyer thrust Tessa into her husband’s arms and hurried to Fatima. “I’ll take him off your hands.”

Not waiting for a “please,” Fatima released him. Tim did not protest, but his eyes tracked her as his grandmother carried him away.

As the party moved into the dining room, Stuart maneuvered close and whispered in her ear. “I’ve never seen Tim take to anyone so quickly.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing,” he said, but Fatima suspected he had something to do with his son’s reaction.

Janice seated her son at the head of the table and the Brockmeyers at his left with Tessa in a highchair between them. She seated Fatima at Stuart’s right, next to the birthday boy and herself, and her husband at the foot of the table.

Stuart prayed for the meal. The moment the prayer was over, Tim looked up at Fatima and asked, “Do you like puppy dogs?”

“Yes, do you?”

He bounced up and down. “Can I have one?”

Fatima looked at him helplessly, wondering if she had purchased the wrong present.

“Pretty please?”

Mrs. Brockmeyer opened her mouth, but Stuart spoke first. "Son, it's too early to speak of new rules. We don't even know whether Fatima will be living with us." He leaned toward Fatima. "My wife never allowed pets in the house."

Poor comfortless boy. No mother, no pet. What shall I say?

Janice handed Tim the hot dog she'd fixed, then eyed her son. "If you're willing to watch a puppy in the evening, I'd be willing to care for it during the day."

Stuart raised an eyebrow. "Two children and an untrained animal, too?"

She smiled. "It will only be temporary."

Does Janice favor our marriage?

"Puppy, puppy," Tessa chimed in, waving her tiny fork. The piece of hot dog sailed onto Mrs. Brockmeyer's dress.

Fatima expected the woman to splutter, but she calmly set the errant morsel on the table and continued to monitor Tessa's progress in eating. Soon everyone chatted happily.

At dessert time, Janice entered the dining room slowly, balancing a chocolate cake with five white candles, all lit. Everyone sang as she set it in front of Tim.

"Now make a wish," Mrs. Brockmeyer said, "and blow out the candles."

Scrunching his eyes closed and balling his fists, Tim filled his cheeks with air. Then he opened his eyes and blew hard. One candle remained aflame. His audience cheered, but he burst into tears.

Stuart rose quickly and went to Tim's side to embrace him. "What's the matter, son?"

"I-I won't g-get a m-m-mommy," Tim said between sniffles.

"Yes, you will," Stuart said amid a chorus of assurances. "We just don't know when."

“Mommy, Mommy,” Tessa wailed.

“There, there.” Mrs. Brockmeyer pulled Tessa from her highchair and hugged her close.

Fatima knew not where to look. Or what to do. She felt terribly out of place—an unwanted pretender that even the candles resisted. Mr. Brockmeyer, looking uncomfortable, glanced at her but said nothing. The Hayneses consoled Tim, telling him it was time to open presents and be happy.

“Excuse me.” Fatima rose from the table and fled outside to a corner of the porch. Inhaling the warm air, she gazed up at the starless sky and longed to be free. Free of human expectations and scrutiny. Unburdened by decisions and deadlines. Far from her father, fiancé, and immigration agents.

Fishing. That’s the image that came to mind. Sunlight shimmering on calm waters. Her bare toes squirming in hot sand. Both hands holding a bamboo pole. One line. One hook. Waiting for one little fish to come along and bite.

“Miss Dede.”

Startled, Fatima turned her gaze toward the door and found Janice studying her with a kind expression. “Call me Fatima.”

“Fatima. Such a pretty name. What does it mean?”

“It was the name of Mohammed’s daughter. I don’t know what it means.”

“It must be hard living so far from home. Surrounded by different customs.”

“Yes, it is. But I can never go back.” Feeling guilty for disrupting the party and causing her hostess to come looking for her, Fatima made a move toward the door.

Janice stopped her with a gentle hand. “Why not?”

Fatima lowered her gaze. “Because I am a Christian, and my family will force me to marry a

Muslim.”

Janice drew her into a warm embrace. “Lord bless you, my dear. My husband and I will pray for you.”

“Thank you. That’s what I need more than anything else.”

“Fatima?” Stuart’s voice broke in. “Are you all right?”

She pulled away and wiped a tear from her eye. “Yes, I’m coming.”

Stuart led her back to the dining room, where Mrs. Brockmeyer cuddled Tessa and whispered in her ear. Tim looked up from a floor full of wrappers and presents.

Thornton handed his grandson Fatima’s gift. “Okay, you can open it now.”

Tim tore away the glittery blue wrapper and squealed. “A dinosaur!”

As he grabbed the inflatable T-Rex, it opened its plastic jaws and roared. He dropped it, sat with a plunk on the floor, and stared wide-eyed. Then he laughed and lunged, making it roar again. Soon he rolled on the floor, hugging the dinosaur and making it roar over and over.

Stuart winked at Fatima. “You seem to have made a hit.”

Thornton gave her a congratulatory look. “Yes, indeed.”

With a scowl in Fatima’s direction, Mrs. Brockmeyer picked up Tessa and disappeared. Her husband followed. Fatima stared after them wondering why Mrs. Brockmeyer guarded Tessa so closely. *Is she afraid that one hug from me will cause Tessa to forget her mother?*

Janice started picking up wrapping paper and folding it. “Son, perhaps Fatima would like to take a walk.”

“Good idea.” Stuart focused his soft brown eyes

on Fatima. “Shall we?”

She nodded and followed him toward the door. Dropping the T-Rex, Tim ran up and clutched at her legs. “Tank you, Miz Day-Day.”

Fatima pulled his hands free and dropped to one knee. She looked into his eyes and smiled. “You’re welcome, young man. Now, if you’ll excuse me, your father and I are going to take a walk.”

Stuart patted him on the head. “We’ll be right back, son. Don’t worry.”

Tim nodded, but kept his eyes focused on them until Stuart pulled the door shut. The memory of his winsome expression followed Fatima down the street, past the trees, shadows, and parked cars.

Fatima’s heart went out to him then turned to another matter. “Mrs. Brockmeyer seems to resent my presence, as if I were a threat to her daughter’s memory. Did you see the way she kept Tessa away from me?”

Stuart gestured resignation with his palms up. “Yeah, I saw, but don’t worry. There’ll be plenty of opportunity to interact with Tessa in the future—with my mother-in-law absent. For all her show of doting on her grandchildren, she’s not the primary babysitter. My mother is. And Mom clearly favors you.”

“Mm.” Fatima didn’t know which was worse: Tim’s desperate need tugging on her conscience or Mrs. Brockmeyer treating her like a leper who shouldn’t touch Tessa.

“Believe me,” Stuart said. “Tessa’s easygoing and adaptable. She’ll take to you in no time.”

Chapter 10—The Traffic Controller

As they strolled along, Fatima noticed many cars lined the curb, but few traveled the street. Sidewalks stretched for blocks, practically deserted. She glanced at Stuart. "Where is everybody?"

"In their homes, eating, watching TV, relaxing."

"I've never seen the city so quiet, even at mealtime."

He chuckled. "This is Evanston, not Chicago."

"Oh."

"So, do you like it?"

"Yes, it's so peaceful. And green." She admired the thick hedges and healthy lawns. "In my country, only five-star hotels and presidential palaces have lawns like these."

Stopping, he reached out his hand and gently turned her to face him. "That's what our life could be like, if we decide to get married. Peaceful. Pleasant. Protected."

No, not yet. All the peace she'd felt fled, and she broke into a cold sweat. *I'm not ready to face this decision.*

"A quiet getting to know one another," he said. "Sharing things together."

She forced herself to listen. *He's the one being reasonable. Facing reality. Knowing we have only eleven days to decide.*

"Not rushing things."

Her ears perked up at those words.

He lifted her chin so that she had no option but to meet his gaze. “Or is there something about me...?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing. It’s just that—” *How can I explain?*

“You were hoping for love. Romance.”

She bowed her head and nodded, feeling like a fool. *All my life I’ve known that a husband would be chosen for me. Where have these silly notions come from?*

Stuart’s soft voice broke in. “We could have that, you know.”

“What?” She looked into his eyes again.

“Romantic love. It could come after marriage. If we took the time to date. Mature in friendship. Before—”

“Oh, yes.” Relief flooded her. “If we decide to marry, I’d want to do exactly that.”

“But you haven’t made up your mind about me yet.”

She shook her head.

“Come, then.” He beckoned with his hand. “Walk with me. Ask anything you want to know.”

She searched for an appropriate question. “Do you get tired standing in the intersection all day?”

“Huh?”

With a hot flood of embarrassment, Fatima realized once again she’d misunderstood something rudimentary that every American would understand. “Didn’t Pastor say you were a traffic controller?”

He chuckled. “As a matter of fact, you’re right. I stand in one of the busiest intersections in the world. Not of cars. Aircraft. Some landing, some taking off. My job is to guide them to land and take off safely.”

She remembered men with earphones motioning with brightly colored wands, but couldn’t remember

seeing any on the runway. "How do you do that?"

"I watch the radar screen and talk to the pilots."

"Where?"

"In the control tower."

"Oh." She covered her mouth and giggled at her ignorance.

"So, you see, we're both in the business of saving lives. You patch them up when they're sick, and I speed them on their way when they're well."

She nodded. *Only I won't be doing that if I'm spending all day cleaning, cooking, and mothering your children.*

"I can see I've made you sad. It's the thought of giving up your career, isn't it?"

She sighed. "You must think me a poor Christian. Jesus gave up everything for me, suffered horribly to pay for my sins, and all I can think about is holding onto my silly dreams."

"No, I think you're courageous. Facing your crisis squarely. Ready to do whatever it takes to follow Jesus. Like give up your country. Live far from your family. Even marry a stranger."

She looked at him puzzled. "You're willing to marry a stranger, too. Why? You're not facing any crisis. You could take your time. Date many women. Find someone of your own culture to love."

He shook his head. "It's not as easy as you think."

"What do you mean? You have a good job and beautiful home. You're handsome and healthy. Still quite young. In my country, you could find two or three wives, easy."

"It's the dating. I dread it. It's like—" He kicked a pebble from the sidewalk. "Holding your breath, diving in deep waters, and struggling to keep your feet free of seaweed. Opening hundreds of oysters in search of one pearl."

"Really?" Fatima laughed. "I thought you

Americans loved to date.”

“Many men do. They love picking up a woman and having some fun. Tossing her back and looking for another. No seriousness or thought of commitment.”

“Oh.” His convictions impressed her.

“Most women feel the same way. They’re not ready to settle down. They just go out for a good time. It’s tough to find someone serious like you.”

She nodded, suddenly understanding what brought them together.

“So, when Pastor Marks sounded me out about your situation...well, the idea seemed attractive. A godsend.” He pulled her to a stop. “That was before I met you. Now that we’ve gotten acquainted, I’m sold on the idea even more. You’re beautiful. Intelligent. Dedicated. Serious about your faith. And you’ve made a hit with Tim. How could I ask for more?”

His praise made her uncomfortable. *I should compliment him in return. But how can I without sending the wrong message?*

“So what are my chances?” His eyes scanned her face. “Am I in the running? Or are your hopes pinned on someone else?”

She searched her heart. His frank question deserved an honest answer. *But what can I say? That I’m still holding onto my childhood dreams—career, freedom, romantic love?*

He chuckled and let his hands fall to his sides. “Who is it?”

“What?”

“Your conflict of schedule was another man, wasn’t it? A younger man, I’ll bet, without children. Someone who will let you practice medicine.”

Until that moment, Fatima’s hope didn’t have any face or name attached. Now, suddenly, she pictured Chad. His lopsided wire frames. His easy smile and calm behavior when things went wrong.

His adoring look and outrageous flattery.

"Who is he?" Stuart asked softly.

She waved her hand dismissively. "A mistake. An accident. A guy who came to the door and invited me out when I was expecting someone else."

"I'm not surprised. The only thing that surprises me is you're not already married."

"But we've only just met."

"I don't mean to this new guy. I mean, an attractive woman like you, studying in this country for what—three, four years?"

"Eight."

"And no man's snapped you up yet?" His tone was incredulous. "When you were seriously looking for love and marriage."

She shook her head sadly. "The man I loved married someone else."

He put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry."

She soaked up the comfort for a moment then pulled away, surprised at herself for allowing it so long.

I've had no comforter except Jesus, and my resistance is down.

"We've both mourned the loss of someone we loved," Stuart said.

She nodded, moved by his sensitivity and scared where it might lead. "Please take me home."

Chapter 11—Fox Lake

Stuart, Tim, and Tessa chased her through the house with lassos. Mrs. Brockmeyer glared. Fatima tried to get to the door, knowing Chad waited outside—pressing the buzzer. But the children held her back. The buzzer kept sounding as she struggled to break free.

She awoke in the dark and switched off the alarm. 3:30 a.m. Saturday. Time to get ready. Yawning, she snatched the clothes she'd set on the chair and hurried into the bathroom. The pelting water brought her fully awake. She showered and dressed quickly then sat at the edge of her bed.

Halfway into her prayer, a soft knock sounded. "Fatima?"

She recognized Chad's voice and jumped to open the door before he could call again. His broad smile greeted her. "Ready?"

She put a shushing finger over her lips and nodded then followed him downstairs. "Everyone sleeps in on Saturday," she explained once they were outside.

He opened the Jeep door for her. "Yeah, most of my neighbors, too. They miss the best part of the day."

She climbed in, thankful the canvas top was in place, but raised her eyebrows at the equipment stored behind the seats. "All that just to catch a few

fish?"

He eased the Jeep into the deserted street. "This isn't a commercial enterprise. We're doing it for fun. With all the amenities."

"Oh."

He chuckled. "The gas alone costs more than the value of the fish. But no amount of money can equal the thrill of sunrise on the lake. The invigoration of the morning air. The joy of communing with nature."

As he merged into the freeway traffic, she glanced around to get her bearings. "Aren't we headed in the wrong direction?"

"That depends on our destination, doesn't it?"

She laughed and relaxed, settling in for a long ride. "You're right. So, surprise me."

"You're an easy person to please. I should've asked you out a long time ago."

Yes. She looked at him wistfully. *That would've given us a better chance.*

"What?" Chad glanced at her curiously as if sensing her thoughts.

"Nothing." She longed to tell him about her situation but didn't dare spoil the magic of the day. *At least I'll have this to look back on, no matter what happens later.*

"So how'd the birthday party go?"

"Fine."

"I didn't know you had family in America."

"I don't." Not wanting to divulge the information he was fishing for, she searched for a way to divert him. "How about you? Do your parents live in the Chicago area?"

"Denver. My brother lives in Tampa. And my sister's in Rawlins, Wyoming."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a surveyor," Chad replied in an amused tone, as if aware of her diversionary tactics.

She persisted. "One of those guys who looks

through a scope along the highway?"

Chad nodded. "Roads. Shopping malls. New subdivisions. All kinds of construction projects."

"What made you choose administration?"

He grinned. "You're not going to tell me about your date, are you?"

She laughed. "No."

He nodded and fell silent.

"I'll tell you one thing," she said, smiling to encourage him. "I expect today will be more fun than the birthday party was."

"Really?"

"I wouldn't say it if it weren't true."

He changed lanes and sped up. "You're an amazing girl. Not just smart and beautiful, but honest to a T."

She shook her head. "I used to be an atrocious liar. But Jesus changed me."

"Tell me about it. How did you come to know the Lord?"

He's the first man to ask me that. Stuart hasn't. Amir didn't. And in all the time I spent with Ibrahim, he didn't. That should have told me something.

"Unless you don't want to tell me," Chad added.

"Oh, but I do." She looked toward sky, dark before the dawn, like the fateful day her story began. "It started when I arrived in America. I felt friendless, clueless, and scared. My sponsors took no interest in helping me. They didn't even meet me at the airport."

"Wow. What'd you do?"

She could taste her desperation even now. "I phoned their number, but there was no answer. So I gave the taxi driver the only address I had."

"Which was?"

"International House." She sighed. "I couldn't believe how expensive the cab fare was. It took

almost all the cash I'd exchanged in the airport. I was devastated. Depressed."

"I can imagine."

"Then a student from Brazil came up and introduced herself. Sancha. She said I looked as lost as she felt her first year. She fed me. Oriented me. Helped me find an apartment."

"What an angel."

Fatima nodded. "God sent her all right. Day after day she kept checking on me. And then she invited me to hear a special speaker at her church. A man named Khalil from Turkey."

"A Muslim convert?"

Chad's interest thrilled her. Not everyone shared her excitement when she spoke of matters of faith. "Yes, only I didn't know it then, or I wouldn't have gone. But out of gratitude to Sancha, I heard him. And it changed my life."

"What'd he say?"

"Jesus appeared to him in a dream. Showed him a glimpse of heaven. Told him that He was the Way. So Khalil found a pastor and gave his heart to Jesus."

Chad whistled. "That's super. So, did you rush up to him and ask how you could become a Christian, too?"

She shook her head. "No, I was in total shock. My whole world turned upside down. Two weeks passed before I could talk about it."

"Really?"

"Sancha could see that something had happened to me, but she didn't press for details. Two days later, all my questions came pouring out. To Sancha. And Pastor Marks."

"How long did it take before you believed?"

"Oh, I believed Khalil right away. You could see the joy on his face. Feel the passion of his love for Jesus. That's what scared me. I knew it was real but

didn't want to face it."

Chad shot her a questioning look. "Face what?"

Fatima flung out her hands. "The alienation of my family. The collapse of my dreams. All the bad things that would happen to me if I abandoned Islam."

"You mean—but I thought Mauritania was a democracy?"

"It is, but that doesn't mean that Muslims are free to change their religion. Or that Christians are free to worship."

"Have you told your parents?"

Fatima bowed her head and confessed softly, "No."

Chad fell silent. She glanced at him and wondered if he were ashamed of her. She folded her hands in her lap and listened to the hum of the wheels. Lulled by the vibration of the soft seats, she closed her eyes and drifted off.

"Fatima?"

She awoke and looked around, trying to get her bearings. Water lapped in a lazy rhythm to which faeries of light danced and spotted yellow flowers swayed. Hues of pink and blue dimmed the stars and announced the dawn. Fatima stretched and yawned, eager for the day's adventure. "Sorry, I must have fallen asleep."

"Partying late into the night with the birthday boy?"

"No." She spotted cabins on the opposite shore. "Where are we?"

"Fox Lake." He reached behind the seat. "Here, could you carry the tackle box?"

"Sure." She watched him liberate two metal poles with spools attached, then followed him down a grassy slope toward a wooden walkway jutting into the lake. "Is that your boat?"

"No, it belongs to a friend of mine." He gestured toward a spot behind her. "So does the cabin."

She turned to look and slipped on the grass. The tackle box flew from her hand, and she landed indelicately.

Dropping the poles, Chad rushed to her side and knelt down. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and accepted his assistance. His arm felt strong and comforting. "Thank you." She looked for his tackle box and gasped in dismay at its spilled contents. "Oh, your poor—what do you call them?"

"Lures. Don't worry about them. As long as none are sticking to you." He started picking them up and frowned when she helped. "Careful, they've got sharp hooks."

She examined a yellow one with green spots. "I thought you were going to bring worms."

"I did." He grinned and held up a wiggly strip of bright red plastic. "The kind that can't crawl away."

"You must think me clumsy."

"No, I think of you as a capable, hard-working woman who hasn't much experience in having fun."

She stared at his wavy blond hair, backlit by the pale blue light of dawn, and suddenly knew who she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. The realization hit her as a bolt from a defibrillator. She lowered her gaze and concentrated on dropping lures into the box.

"Come on." He snapped the lid in place. "Leave the rest. We need to get out on the water before the fish stop biting."

Numbly, she complied. Stepping into the boat, she sat and fastened the life jacket as instructed. She watched the swirls from each oar stroke move off and disappear just like her spinning thoughts.

Chad spoke softly, breaking into her contemplation. "Scared?"

“Yes,” she said before understanding the question. “No,” she hastily corrected, embarrassed she’d given away her heart’s secret when he’d simply asked about boating. “Well, maybe just a little. I’ve never been in a boat before.”

“You’re perfectly safe with that life jacket on. Even if you can’t swim. Besides, no big cruiser will come along and swamp us. Only us fishermen out this early.”

She scanned the lake for signs of life. A shadowy boat with two silhouettes hugged the western shore.

“Here’s a good spot.” Chad drew the oars into the boat and pointed. “Could you drop the anchor?”

She picked up a tubular chunk of rusted metal at the end of a rope. “This?”

“Yes, just lower it into the water. Gently. You don’t want to scare the fish.”

Chad instructed her how to cast and reel in, how to vary the direction and modulate the speed. He had to repeat several instructions due to her errant thoughts, especially when he placed his hand on hers to correct her grip.

How do you expect to reel in a husband if you are unwilling to toss out any bait? The memory of Amir’s hateful words stabbed her.

“What’s the matter?” Chad asked, releasing her hand.

Fatima looked at him helplessly, lost for words. Again, she wished for her mother’s counsel. *Only Mother doesn’t know American men or customs.*

“Was it wrong for me to touch you?” he asked.

“No, no. You have nice hands.” She blushed and thrashed about in her mind for a change of subject.

A worried look clouded his face. He returned to his seat and cast toward the shore. “You’ll have to tell me the rules, Fatima. I know nothing about the customs in Mauritania.”

She weighed his suggestion and shook her head.

"Dating is something I know nothing about. So let's go by American rules. I mean the Christian rules in this country. Okay?"

His eyes searched hers a moment before he spoke. "Sure...but tell me if I step over the line."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

His solicitation melted her heart. Made her want to confide everything. Thrust her fate into his hands. Yet fear held her back. She nodded her agreement, afraid that one spoken "yes" would breach the dam and let all her problems come rushing out.

Silence reigned for a quarter-hour, broken only by the spin of the reel and the splash of the lure.

"Got one," Chad said.

She looked into the depths and saw a thin gray body wiggle closer to the boat. Chad lifted it out of the water, dripping and thrashing. She watched him open its mouth and unfasten the hook. Then he lifted a lid she hadn't known was there and slipped the fish into the opening.

"Water tank," he said. "Keeps the fish alive until we're ready to clean it."

She remembered piles of fish on a beach attracting gulls and flies. "Americans think of everything."

"Except persecuted Christians in foreign countries."

She stared at him in amazement, not gaping like a fish but feeling just as hooked. His empathy drew her heart toward his, tempting her again to confide.

"Fatima, quick..."

She followed his gaze and woke to the tug on her line.

"Start reeling in...not fast...that's right...yes...a little more...I'll grab hold when he gets close to the boat...a little more...gotcha."

Fatima squealed in delight but knew she had to hold still.

“It’s a beauty, a real keeper.” He freed it, lowered it into the tank, and grinned at her with open admiration.

Her heart flipped, and she couldn’t help but grin back. *Am I a keeper, too?*

Chapter 12—Juliette

“Yoo-hoo!” The female voice drifted over the water as Fatima struggled to unhook her third fish.

“Juliette,” Chad gasped.

Fatima slipped the bass into the tank and looked toward shore. A slim brunette in jeans, blouse, and sneakers waved from the dock.

“She’s not supposed to be here. No one is,” Chad said under his breath. He waved toward the dock and took the oars. “I’d better find out what’s up. Could you hoist the anchor?”

“Is she your sister?” Fatima asked, afraid of the answer.

“Not mine, my friend’s. The one who told me his cabin was free for the weekend.”

Weekend? Fatima tugged on the anchor cord and wondered what Chad had planned.

As they drew closer, Fatima could make out freckles, a pug nose, and delicate features. Most revealing of all were her green eyes and bright smile focused on Chad.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” Juliette said with only a flick of her eyes toward Fatima. “Imagine my surprise when I woke to find your Jeep on my lawn.”

“Uh.” Chad faltered as he stood up in the boat. He steadied himself and stepped onto the dock without mishap. “Juliette, I’d like you to meet my

friend Fatima Dede, a resident doctor at my hospital. Fatima, this is Juliette Prince, an Urbana graduate.”

“Careful,” Juliette said, lending Fatima a hand as she stepped out of the boat. That brought them face to face.

Fatima squeezed Juliette’s hand. “Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise.” Her frank gaze forced Fatima to look down. “Come in and have some waffles.”

“You two go ahead,” Chad said. “I’ll join you after I’ve cleaned the fish.”

Fatima hesitated. She much preferred cleaning fish to facing Juliette. Yet what choice did she have? She followed her into the kitchen and noticed three places set on a square, varnished table.

“So, you’re in training at Chad’s hospital?” Juliette asked.

“Yes, what about you? What’s your degree in?”

“Art.” Juliette swung an arc with her hand. “Can’t you tell?”

Fatima scanned the room. A framed watercolor of a harlequin hung behind the table. A shiny maroon vase stood empty on the refrigerator. Spotting a familiar-looking bronze sculpture—a shepherd holding a lamb about his shoulders—she stepped closer to get a better look.

“You would pick out the one object I didn’t make.” Juliette laughed, lifting it from a stack of papers on the counter and handing it to Fatima. “I bought this in Ouagadougou.”

“A Pulaar,” Fatima said in amazement as she ran her fingers across the shepherd’s face. She wondered if God were trying to tell her something—like go home and suffer for Jesus’ name.

“You’ve been to Africa?”

“I come from Mauritania.” She handed back the hefty object. “South of Morocco.”

Juliette raised an eyebrow and pulled out a kitchen chair. "Here, sit down."

"Thank you."

"Then you'll be returning to practice medicine there?"

"That was the original plan." She watched Juliette's eyes to gauge her reaction.

"Oh," Juliette said, her shoulders sagging. She turned her back and poured batter onto a square griddle.

Fatima scanned the windows, but none of them provided a view of Chad. All she could do was listen to his whistled tune—punctuated by an occasional chopping sound—and pray that he finish soon.

Juliette sat down on the opposite side of the table and toyed with the silverware. "So, how long have you two known each other?"

"One week is all. Unless you count a wave and hello before then. And you?"

Juliette tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear. "Four years off and on." She sighed. "I suppose you're looking for a green card."

The shock of the question made Fatima gasp. Though said with an air of resignation, it felt like an accusation. What could she say to defend herself? Nothing.

"Yes," Juliette said, her pale skin growing paler. "I can see you are." Snatching the cloth napkin, she rose abruptly and turned her back.

Fatima rose to placate her. "Please, I beg you—"

Juliette spun around, her face pink and contorted, the napkin clenched in her fist. "You won't get away with it. I'll stop you somehow, if it's the last thing I do. Chad may be soft-hearted. That's one reason I love him. But he's no dummy. And he doesn't take kindly to being made a fool of."

Fatima froze. "I would never—"

"Why, of all the men in the hospital, did you

have to pick *him*?”

“I didn’t. He picked me. He knocked on my door and invited me out. I didn’t even recognize who he was.”

Juliette’s eyes widened. She opened and closed her mouth soundlessly.

“Please believe me. And please, I’m begging you, don’t say anything to Chad.” *Why not? Give her a reason.*

Juliette almost snarled. “That would spoil your little scheme, wouldn’t it? So why shouldn’t I tell him?”

Fatima felt as if she were standing before immigration officials, threatened with deportation, her fate resting on her next word. Then she remembered Jesus’ promise that it was not she who would answer before the tribunal but the Holy Spirit.

Taking a deep breath, she replied with the first answer that came to mind. “Because you are a fair person, and you wouldn’t want to win Chad using unfair means.”

Juliette gaped, her eyes blinking rapidly, her hand clenching and unclenching. “You’re a believer, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

She sighed, dropping her hands to her sides. “I should have known. That makes it even worse. But you’re right. As much as I love Chad, I won’t fight dirty. I’ll beat you fair and square.”

“Thank you,” Fatima said with humble awe and relief, feeling as if angels had intervened to save her from instant exposure.

A noise at the door alerted them to Chad’s entrance. He carried a plastic bag full of filets.

“Ah, I see you’re getting acquainted.” He sniffed the air. “Are the waffles ready?”

Juliette darted to the counter. Fatima pressed

her fingers to her temples and slumped back onto her chair. She watched Chad stow the fish in the refrigerator and wash his hands before coming to the table. "Is this my place?"

"Yes," Juliette said, returning with a loaded spatula, "and here are your waffles."

"Mm, just the way I like them." He smiled and watched Juliette return to her cooking. Then he forked two of the four sections onto Fatima's plate. "Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank You for the beautiful morning, safe trip, hungry fish, and delicious food. Be our guest at this table and bless our fellowship. Amen."

He poured syrup on his waffles and gestured toward hers. "Same for you? More? Less. Okay, if you're sure."

Juliette turned and frowned, a trace of steam escaping from the waffle iron.

Feeling guilty, Fatima tasted a morsel. "Delicious." She cut off a second portion and searched for a safe subject.

Chad looked toward Juliette. "Your brother said you were exploring ghost towns in Nevada."

"That shows you how little my big brother knows. I called off that trip months ago and decided to kick back here instead."

"Well, we won't disturb you." Chad said. "The fish have pretty much stopped biting, anyway. We'll finish breakfast and head back to Chicago."

Stopped biting? Fatima nearly choked on this whopper. She managed to keep a straight face and nod at his decision to leave. Relieved. The last thing she wanted to do was remain where Juliette could break her promise and reveal all.

In Mauritania, second wives consulted *marabouts* to put curses on first wives. She didn't trust human nature—her own or Juliette's. Their competition for the affection of one man could lead

only to friction.

“No, don’t do that,” Juliette said. “Take a stroll. Show Fatima the neighborhood. Identify the songbirds and their songs. Have a pleasant morning and come back for an old-fashioned fish fry. They’ll taste better here at the lake, when they’re still fresh.”

That’s her strategy. She wants to show off her cooking. Prove what a gracious, accommodating person she is. Fatima looked at Chad and held her breath.

He turned to her with an eager expression. “Would you like to hear the meadowlark? The catbird and the crow?”

Fatima felt trapped. How could she say no to joining him in his hobby? She started to answer yes, but an inner warning stopped her. “Perhaps another time.”

The corners of Juliette’s mouth turned up in ill-hid triumph.

With a look of disappointment, Chad shrugged his shoulders. “Okay. As soon as I’ve had another waffle, we’ll hit the road.”

Fatima’s second waffle tasted less sweet. She chewed in silence, pondering what she could do on the trip home to undo the damage. She scarcely heard Juliette’s chatter and never entered in.

“...cutest chipmunk stuffing its cheeks with seeds.”

“Did you paint it?”

“You want to see?” Juliette jumped up.

“Sure.” Chad pushed back from the table and glanced inquisitively at Fatima.

She shook her head and made a show of cutting another chunk of waffle. He and Juliette disappeared, leaving Fatima alone with her thoughts—and the muffled sounds of laughter from upstairs.

Chapter 13—Blackbird's Call

Fatima held her breath until the Jeep turned the corner and left the cabin out of sight. Relaxing, she settled deeper into the seat and began breathing freely again. She stole a glance at Chad and waited for an opportunity to execute her plan.

"Sorry about that," Chad said. "I had no idea that Juliette would be there."

"I'm glad you didn't. Otherwise, you wouldn't have brought me here, and we wouldn't have had such a fun time fishing." She smiled as convincingly as she could.

"You really mean it?" he asked in a lighter tone.

"Yes, I had a wonderful time catching my first fish. And second. And third. Didn't you?"

"Yes, a wonderful time watching you catch them. I just wish it could have gone on and on. Until we filled the whole boat." He chuckled. "Except there's a six bass limit."

"You mean the police write tickets for too many fish?"

"Yep. Only they're called 'game wardens.'"

"Hmm. Like a referee for soccer."

He laughed. "Yes, but 'game' is the name for the animals you bag as a hunter or catch as a fisherman."

Fatima joined his laughter. "English is such a strange language."

“Humph. What about Arabic? I can’t image how you could learn Arabic, French, and English. I’d be lost.”

“In Africa, children grow up learning two or three languages at once. It comes naturally. They don’t think anything about it.”

Chad cast her a searching look, then nodded and returned his gaze to the road. He seemed deep in thought. She wondered what provoked it. Was it her reference to Africa? To children? To the ease of learning languages?

She turned her attention to a passing field, amazingly green and crowded with stalks, quite unlike the sparse millet fields at home. Not wanting to interrupt his thoughts, she didn’t ask what grain it was. Or what fertilizer they used. She simply watched and waited.

“What’s that?” she cried.

He braked hard. The Jeep swerved slightly and came to an abrupt stop. He looked about him. “Wh-what?”

“That elegant black bird with a red-orange patch on his shoulder.”

He sighed. “Whew. Don’t scare me that way. I thought—never mind.” He craned his neck. “Where? Ah yes, that’s a red-winged blackbird.”

“Does it sing?”

“Sort of.” He whistled a “whert-a-lee” sound.

She giggled. “Can we get out and listen?”

“Well, there’s no good place to park.” He gave her a puzzled look. “Why didn’t you walk with me at Fox Lake, when you had the chance?”

“I had my reasons.”

“So, do you really want to go bird-watching sometime?”

She smiled effortlessly at his little-boy eagerness. “Yes, with all my heart.”

“Perhaps another time,” he said with a broad

smile, echoing her earlier words. "Yeah, sometime real soon." He leaned toward her, but the seatbelt restrained him. He unbuckled it.

A jolt of awareness brought blood rushing to her head. *He's going to kiss me.* She waited, powerless to say or do anything, desiring his kiss but having no clue whether she should allow it.

Free of the seatbelt, he leaned closer, but stopped inches away, his breath warm and close. "You don't want—?"

"I do, but I don't know whether I should."

He grinned and patted her left hand, which was braced in expectation of his kiss. "Then we'll wait until you're sure."

She nodded mutely, overwhelmed by his tenderness. *Oh, Lord, he's the one I want. What do I do?*

He rebuckled his seatbelt, checked the mirror, and brought the Jeep back onto the road.

She glanced at him, feeling foolish for having so many inhibitions. She knew from sneaking and watching soaps on satellite TV as a teenager that Americans didn't have any hesitation about kissing—or doing anything else—before marriage. What about the Christians? She made a mental note to ask Pastor Marks.

Other perplexities plagued her as they rode along in silence. When should she tell Chad her situation? Was it fair to him to guard her secret? Yet she feared revealing it prematurely would destroy all chance of love. Or did he feel some love for her already? What did his intended kiss mean?

"Will you be returning to Africa soon?" Chad asked with a worried look.

Fatima chose her words carefully. "I'm not sure. My original plan was to seek a license to practice medicine in Mauritania as soon as I finished training here."

“But you’re having second thoughts?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Hope buoyed her heart. “Why do you say that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? If you stay longer, we’ll have more time. To see each other. Do things together. Get better acquainted.” Chad glanced at her with wide-eyed eagerness. “Don’t you want that?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Great.”

Tell him, tell him. Fatima hesitated and fought down her panic. “Suppose there isn’t time.”

His head whipped around. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Suppose...suppose you and I had no time to get to know each other,” she said haltingly, her stomach tied in knots.

“That would be a crying shame.”

“Suppose we had to face a decision right away: to go our separate ways and never see each other again, o-or—”

“Or what?”

She shook her head, having lost the courage to tell him.

“Or what, Fatima? Tell me.” He pulled into a small grocery parking lot and turned off the motor. Angling his body in her direction, he reached out and took her hand.

She looked up shyly for a second then bowed her head. Yet, she could feel the beating of her heart pulsing through her hand into his. She tugged on her hand.

He held it fast. “Are you saying we don’t have much time?”

She nodded and freed her hand.

“But why? What aren’t you telling me?”

“My visa expires as soon as I finish my training. The only way for me to remain in this country is to

marry a citizen." *There, I said it.*

"What! So, that's why you asked me if I were a citizen."

She nodded in defeat, regretting that she had shied away from his kiss. She knew the chance would never come again.

He retook the road and stared straight ahead, his jaw muscles moving slightly. Fatima turned away, dismayed at the sight of his withdrawal. Leaning her head against the window, she stared morosely at the passing telephone poles.

"Suppose," Chad said after a long silence, "I took a leave of absence and came to Mauritania to renew our acquaintance. Would you like that?"

She shook her head sadly. "You'd never be allowed to see me."

"Why ever not?"

"Because my family would keep me prisoner until I consented to marry a Muslim. They've already picked him out."

"Oh, Fatima." He looked at her, aghast. "That's terrible."

Fatima nodded. His word "terrible" with its "terror" summed up her feelings exactly.

"Oh," he groaned. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? No, why didn't I ask you out sooner? All this time wasted. I feel so stupid."

She gave a hollow laugh. "I'm the one that's stupid. For months, I loved the wrong man. A phony Christian who returned to Pakistan to marry a rich Muslim girl. So, you see, I'm the stupid one. So stupid that, had you asked me out sooner, I would have refused."

"Is that really how you feel? Stupid if you refused to go out with me?"

"Yes, I'm glad you came along just when you did. When I could appreciate you."

Chad's voice brightened. "Then maybe it was

God. Maybe He arranged our meeting at the right time. Do you think that's possible?"

"Oh, yes," she said with all her heart, "very possible."

"Then that's our answer. We'll put our future in God's hands and seek His will. He knows our hearts. He knows if we're right for each other. Don't you think?"

"Yes, I do," Fatima said, admiring Chad more than ever.

"So, will you do that? Pray and see what God wants for us?"

"Yes, yes. I'll pray every day, every night, every—" She stopped, realizing she was confessing how much she wanted to marry him.

"So will I. How many days do we have to decide?"

"Ten."

He whistled. It came out similar to his red-winged blackbird call. She tried to suppress a grin, but couldn't.

"That's not much time, is it? We'd better pray every day."

Chapter 14—Fate

Fatima watched Pastor Marks talk on the phone, not hearing a word, her thoughts miles away—remembering Chad's determined look when he vowed to pray.

Clunk. "Sorry for the interruption. What were you saying?"

She inhaled and leaned forward. "What should I tell Stuart?"

Pastor looked down at his writing pad. "Ah, yes. You decided you care deeply for Chad and want to marry him. But you don't know how he feels or what his decision will be."

"Yes."

"You're afraid to say too much to Stuart, for fear that you would have no fallback position."

"Fall back?"

Pastor cleared his throat. "No alternative plan, should Chad decide against marriage. Is that right?"

"Yes. It seems so unfair to Stuart, and little Timmy, to pretend that I'm still considering living with them when I'm not. Not unless—oh, I feel so selfish."

"No, you're very courageous and practical, facing facts squarely."

"So, what should I do?"

Pastor leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "Well, let's consider the

facts. First, does Stuart strike you as a man madly in love with you?"

Fatima burst out laughing. "No, not at all. He's still very much in love with his wife. And hardly sees me at all, except in a practical way. As a make-do substitute. First as mother, second as wife. No, second as a cook and housekeeper. Maybe third as wife."

"So," Pastor said with a twinkle in his eye. "You would say he's considering the matter very practically?"

"Definitely."

"As you are." Pastor nodded matter-of-factly.

"No. Yes. I mean—"

"Practical, that is, when it comes to Stuart."

"Yes, that's it," she said.

"So, you're not exactly holding Stuart prisoner of suspense. He's not waiting with bated breath for you to declare deep feelings for him."

She giggled. "No."

"Then there's no real harm done, for either of you, to hold onto your options."

"No, except for his son."

"Yes, there's little Timmy. What are his feelings toward you?"

"He looks at me with such longing for a mother." She sighed. "It'll break his heart."

"Yes, he needs a mother's love. But children are resilient."

She looked up uncomprehending.

"Flexible like a sapling, a baby tree. They don't break very easily but snap back."

Fatima searched his face, wanting desperately to believe.

"Sure, he'll shed a few tears now," Pastor continued. "But as soon as Stuart finds the right mother for him, he'll forget all his sorrows and cling to her, soaking up affection and joy. Why, he'll be

happy in no time.”

“Oh, I hope so.”

“Count on it. So, the real question is, how honest do you want to be in informing Stuart of his chances? So he can take some practical steps in dating other women.”

Fatima relaxed and considered the question.

Pastor grinned. “Of course, now that Stuart has taken you out, he’s probably back in circulation already.”

“Circulation?”

“Seeing other women. Taking them places.”

Fatima laughed and stood up, not wanting to waste any more of the pastor’s time. “So I’ve been fretting over nothing.”

“Wait, aren’t you forgetting something?”

She sat back down. “What?”

“Prayer.”

“Oh, yes. I want to pray more than anything else. My future with Chad depends on it.”

“You lead out,” Pastor said. “Pray whatever’s on your heart, and I’ll close.”

Fatima stepped from the church office into the sunshine and took a deep breath, heedless of the pollution. Spurred by a wild urge to dance, she flung her arms toward the sky and pirouetted, nearly colliding with a student dismounting from his bike. “Oops! Pardon me.”

The student scowled, snatched his bike away, and fumbled with the straps attaching his backpack. Flushing in embarrassment, she walked briskly away.

“Fatima!”

She turned and broke into an exuberant smile at the sight of Stuart approaching. “Hello, what brings you here?”

Stuart gave her a quick hug. “Probably the same

as you. Seeking Pastor Marks' counsel."

*Counsel to do what? Break it off with me gently?
Or convince me to marry you?*

He took her by the arm and pointed across the street. "But that can wait. Let's go for lunch. Arty's Delicatessen. They have great Reuben sandwiches, pastrami, roast beef, just about anything you might desire. Except lamb shish kebobs or any of your Arab fare. Sorry."

Fatima laughed and fell into step beside him. "I've done without lamb for years now. One more meal without won't hurt me."

"Careful," he said, pulling her back from the curb as a taxi rolled up. "Jaywalking requires some practice." He guided her around the obstacle and safely across the street.

She cast him a mock-adoring look. "My traffic controller."

He gave her an odd look as he opened the deli door. "You seem in an ebullient mood today."

"Must be the summer air."

"Hmm." He joined the queue and pointed toward the menu board. "So what will you have?"

"You choose. Anything besides pork."

"Okay, find us a table."

Searching the crowded room, she spotted a table with two empty chairs and headed toward it. A white-haired lady arrived first and hooked her shopping bag over the back of one chair. Fatima turned and looked elsewhere. A young couple got up from a table in the far corner. She dashed to claim it.

Two minutes later, Stuart arrived with a tray. He set a loaded plate in front of her: sandwich, chips, pickle, extra mayonnaise and mustard. "I'll get the drinks. Coke? Iced tea? Lemonade? What'll you have?"

"Iced tea, thanks."

She watched him pilot the cups through the

crowd toward the soft drink dispenser and wondered what brought him to see Pastor Marks. Perhaps it had nothing to do with her, but she suspected otherwise. *Wouldn't it be weird if he came with the same agenda? Interest in someone else and not knowing how much to tell me?* She decided to let him lead the conversation until she found out.

Returning with the cups, he sat down and asked her to pray.

"Lord, thank You for arranging this meeting. Guide our words and thoughts. Have Your way in our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen."

A businessman at the next table turned and stared.

Stuart lifted his sandwich and paused. "I've noticed Muslims have no difficulty praying in public."

"Muslims don't divide life between the secular and sacred. Did I embarrass you?"

"No, quite the contrary. Keep it up. Wish I could be bolder like you."

"Thank you." His compliment buoyed her spirits. *That's the first observation he's made about my personality. Perhaps he sees me after all.*

Stuart chewed a while in silence. Then he swallowed and set down his sandwich. "I guess I should tell you. I took an old friend to the theater Friday night."

"How old?" she quipped.

"A year or two older than you, perhaps." He studied her as if waiting for a reaction.

"What film did you see?" she asked indifferently.

"A play, actually. *Scatterbrained.*"

"Was it good?"

He chuckled. "If I were trying to make you jealous, it didn't work, did it?"

"Uh-uh. I'm happy for you. You're doing the wise thing."

He raised an eyebrow.

“That’s not to say I’m not scared,” she said.

“Scared of what?”

She threw up her hands. “Running out of time with no husband and no green card. No option but to return to Mauritania.”

“Then marry me.”

She shook her head. “Please don’t press for a decision now. You’ll have your answer in eight days.”

“Who is he? The last time I asked, you evaded my question. Surely, I deserve an answer now.”

Fatima wrung her hands, nervous about ruining her chances with Stuart, yet knowing he was right; he deserved an answer. “His name is Chad. He works in HR at the hospital. We went fishing Saturday morning. And agreed to pray for God’s wisdom concerning marriage.”

“But you already know in your heart what your desire is.”

“Yes.”

Stuart wiped his mouth and set down the napkin. Reaching across the table, he laid his right hand on her left. “Fatima, listen to me.”

Swallowing, she looked him directly in the eye. “I’m listening.”

“My offer still stands. If, after the eight days, you wish to marry me, we will.”

Deeply touched, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. Words failed her. Tears formed in her eyes. She sat back down.

He reached in his pocket and started to hand her a handkerchief, but stopped midway. “Is that someone you know?”

Fatima turned, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, and froze. Standing in the queue, staring at her with a look of bewilderment and dismay, was Chad.

Before she could think, he abandoned his

position in line, squeezed past a couple in the door, and exited.

"No, wait!" Fatima cried.

She jumped up and wove between tables and customers, struggling to follow him. Arriving on the sidewalk, she looked left and right but spotted no trace of him. Too many pedestrians crowded the sidewalk. Heads bobbed everywhere, but none with Chad's wavy blond hair. Frantic, she called out, "Chadwick, Chadwick," not caring who heard.

What have I done? She slumped against a lamppost and closed her eyes in despair.

Someone squeezed her shoulder. She opened her eyes hopefully. Stuart's kind brown eyes studied her.

"All's not lost," he said. "You'll find him. Didn't you say he worked at your hospital?"

She managed a nod.

"If you want, I'll take you there."

Fatima shook her head.

"And I'll explain everything," Stuart said. "I'll tell him what you told me. How your heart is set on waiting for his answer—clear to the last possible moment."

"No, please." She groaned. "It's bad enough as it is. You're being so kind and all. Making me feel childish and selfish for postponing my decision. Don't put yourself out any more for me."

"Okay. But if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

She nodded.

He lifted his hand in a small wave. "Goodbye, then, and Godspeed."

"Bye." She waved and watched him merge into the crowd and disappear.

Chapter 15—Going in Circles

Dispirited yet determined, Fatima plodded back toward Chad's office, knowing no other contact point. She berated herself for never asking his phone number or address.

I don't even know his name. "Chad" for Chadwick, but what's his first name? Charles? Curtis? Something starting with a C. Why didn't I pay attention?

Pedestrians flowed past her. Despondency slowed her steps, plus knowing there was no rush. Chad wouldn't return until after his lunch break, so she'd have to sit and wait. *Susan will tire of seeing me.*

Instead of Susan, the lanky brunette manned the desk. "May I help you?"

"No, I'll wait here for Mr. Chadwick."

"He won't be back."

Her heart sank to her stomach. "Wh-what?"

"Not until next week."

Fatima stared in denial, unwilling to accept such a horrible delay. She felt time slipping through her fingers like sand. Only eight days before the scheduled wedding. "What day next week?"

"Monday, I suppose," the brunette said with a shrug and turned her attention back to the monitor.

Clacking keys accompanied Fatima's panicked thoughts. With a quavery voice she asked, "Could

you give me his cell phone number? I need to get hold of him. It's urgent."

"Nope." The brunette kept typing. "You should know better than to ask for confidential information like that."

An employee came in, so Fatima yielded her place and left the office in defeat.

In the corridor, she regained the presence of mind to look for an office directory and found the name she was looking for: Clarence W. Chadwick.

She jotted it down and raced to the library. The phone book yielded his street address and residential phone number. She hurried outside for good reception and punched in the number. Clutching the phone to her ear, she held her breath. After five rings, her heart leaped at the sound of his voice, but it was only a recording:

"If you are a friend of Chad's, you are an important member of a very select group, and he's anxious to hear from you. Please leave a message after the beep. If you are a telemarketer, bill collector, or alien invader—"

Sighing, she terminated the call and looked heavenward, searching for inspiration. After a moment, she took a deep breath and phoned again.

"Chad, it's you I care about. Not the guy in the deli. He's just someone my pastor recommended before I met you. Remember Barry? That was another recommendation. Nothing came of it. Please give me a chance to explain. Don't throw away our chances to—"

A dial tone signaled her time had run out. She clamped the phone shut and headed home.

Sunshine fell on other pedestrians, but Fatima's gloomy thoughts focused downward on the dust and discarded gum wrappers. She halted at the first intersection and stared at the blinking red DON'T. *Don't hope, don't hold out for love, don't resist your*

destiny.

Strangers bunched around her. She moved when they moved, hardly looking up. Midway across the street someone touched her elbow.

“Playing hooky, Miss Dede?” teased a male voice.

Turning, she recognized Stan Connors and remembered the seminar. She reversed directions and trotted to catch up. “I forgot.”

“You seem preoccupied lately.”

“Yes.”

“Nothing serious, I hope.”

She shook her head. Then, feeling like a liar, she amended, “Nothing God can’t handle.”

“God? Don’t give me that—wait, you’re from one of those Muslim countries, aren’t you? But I thought you called him ‘Allah.’”

She double-stepped to match his brisk pace. “I believe in Jesus the Son of God now.”

Stan whistled. “Don’t let Dr. Schlosser hear you talk that way. He has no patience with believers of any kind.”

“That’s okay.” She laughed. “God has a plenty of patience with him. And with all of us. Which is a good thing, considering how long it took me to come to faith in His Son.”

Stan’s long legs seemed to stretch farther and move faster, as if he wanted to escape her talk of God. So, she slowed and fell behind.

He stopped. “You may think you’ve made a wise move, switching your religion to conform to your new country, but I’ve got news for you.”

Fatima mentally braced herself.

“America is no longer a Christian country. If you really want to fit in, read Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion*.”

That’s the last straw, Fatima fumed and opened her mouth to tell Stan off—but laughed instead.

"What's so funny?"

"Me. For the first time in my life an English proverb came to mind first."

"Oh?" Stan's face shifted from belligerent to amused. "Which proverb was that?"

"The straw that broke the camel's back." She resumed her walk. "Which is really funny, when you think about it. According to my English teacher, you Americans say it all the time, but you don't have any camels."

He smiled and fell into step beside her. "You're too clever by half."

"What?"

"The neat way you switched subjects." They arrived at the entrance, and he put his hand on the door and paused. "I've got two tickets to the Cubs game next Tuesday. Want to come?"

"No, thank you. My boyfriend wouldn't like it."

He opened the door. "Too bad. Just when I was beginning to like you."

A doctor hailed Stan, saving her from making a reply. She quickly found a seat and slumped into it.

Insult my Jesus and then ask me out? As if my heart didn't exist, only my body. Men. They're all the same. No, I take that back, Lord. Chad's different; so is Stuart. Oh, what am I going to do?

One thing I will never do is marry a scoffer like Stan just to avoid deportation. A Mauritanian jail would be far better.

The irony of this realization tempted her to laugh. Laugh or cry, what other choice did she have?

Afraid she might break down and do both if she didn't take control of herself, she sat up and tried focusing on Dr. Schlosser's presentation.

Chapter 16—Sancha

As soon as Fatima arrived home, she kicked off her sandals, knelt beside her bed, and poured out her heart to God. “Oh, Lord, time is running out. And everything is going wrong. If I’m going to marry Chad, I’ve got to find him and apologize. Where should I go? Or should I give up on him and say yes to Stuart? Is that what You’re trying to tell me?”

A distant siren sounded. Footsteps walked across the floor above. Somewhere in the building water was running. Though she strained to hear God’s voice, nothing.

Her memory floated back to another time of distress and the angel who came to the rescue: Sancha. Her wide smile and cola-colored eyes. Her exuberant faith and readiness to help. Rising from her knees, Fatima dug in her purse and retrieved her cell phone.

The voice of her friend sang out after two rings. “Hello.”

“Sancha. Thank God I found you. I need your advice. Can you spare a minute?”

“Sure, I’ll come right over.”

“No, don’t do that.” Fatima hated to inconvenience her friend that much. “Just talk to me over the phone.”

“No, no, my sister. You need more than a few words. You need a hug. I can tell. I can hear it in

your voice. You're in your apartment, sitting in the dark. Right?"

"Yes," Fatima said, amazed at her friend's perception. "Are you sure you can spare the time?"

Sancha laughed. "Time is not something to be spared, but redeemed. I'll be right there."

Fatima busied herself preparing Mauritanian tea, regretting she had no coffeemaker or Brazilian coffee. Searching the cupboard for cookies, she found a packet of dried dates. She turned on the living room light then cleaned and set the miniature teakwood table.

The doorbell startled her. Could that be Sancha already? She peered through the peephole and opened the door wide. "Oh, Sancha."

Sancha stepped in and embraced her, a hint of lemon shampoo wafting from her shiny raven hair. "Praise the Lord. It's good to see you again. Forgive me for not stopping by sooner."

Fatima held her tight, tears welling up. "No, it's my fault. I should have called when this whole thing started."

She clung for a moment, drawing strength, then pulled back.

Sancha released her and smiled encouragingly. "Well, I'm here now. Tell your sister all about it. Oh, I see you've already prepared tea. Good. Here's a little something to go with it." She held out a packet of cookies.

Fatima led her to the sofa and served tea. Then, sitting down and folding her hands in her lap, she confessed the desperate measures she'd taken to find a husband.

"There's no reason to be ashamed," Sancha said. "In your sandals, I would have done the same thing. So, what went wrong?"

"I fell in love."

"Praise God." Sancha smiled broadly, showing

perfect teeth. "That's wonderful. A miracle. Right when you needed one. But why so sad? Doesn't he love you?"

"No, and now he never will." She explained what had happened, including how she'd gone to Chad's office to apologize, only to learn that he wouldn't be back for a week.

Sancha's eyes sparkled with secret mischief. "Tell me, when you and he were talking about the ten days you had to decide, did he mention any plans to take a vacation?"

"No."

"Did he look ill when he turned to leave the delicatessen?"

Fatima had no trouble remembering Chad's expression. "Stunned, not ill."

Sancha nodded sagely. "So it can't be sick leave or a planned vacation. It's got to be personal business."

"What's that?"

"Responding to a personal emergency."

Fatima's heart missed a beat. "Oh no, you think someone in his family got sick or died?"

Sancha smirked. "I'll bet the personal crisis is you."

Fatima stared in disbelief.

"He saw you kissing Stuart on the cheek and misunderstood. Now he's run to some place of refuge to lick his wounds. If you go there, you can find him and explain everything."

"Juliette," Fatima gasped.

"Who?"

"The girl he's dated off and on for four years. She loves him." She recounted the encounter at Fox Lake.

"She loves him, but does he love her? That's the question. He's known her for four years, yet sent you flowers and prayed to see if God favors his marrying

you." Sancha clicked her tongue. "Hardly sounds like Juliette's the one he's interested in."

"Maybe not. But don't you see? If he's upset with me and Juliette consoles him, anything could happen."

"True. But I doubt if he'll drop in on her a second time. What about his parents? Do they live in the Chicago area?"

"Let me think." Fatima closed her eyes and thought back to her groggy conversation with him on the way to the lake. "Denver. Is that far?"

"Halfway across the country." Sancha paused, a hand over her mouth. "Suppose Chad wanted to go someplace nearby, where he could be quiet and alone and think things over. Where would he go?"

"He loves to walk in the woods. And watch birds. And something else." She pressed her fingers to her temples but couldn't remember.

"You could try Lincoln Park, right here in Chicago. It's got a bird house and miles of walking paths."

Fatima gaped. "Miles?"

"Yeah, I know it's a long shot. But it's better than moping here in the dark. At least you'd be doing something to try to find him. Remember, Jesus says, 'Seek, and you shall find.'"

"I'll do it. Anywhere else I should look?"

"Too many of them. All kinds of parks, woods, trails, bird sanctuaries. You will definitely need God's help to find him." Sancha's dark eyes twinkled as she quirked a wry smile. "Of course, once Chad calms down and thinks things over, he may come looking for you."

"Oh, I hope so."

Sancha reached out her hands to grasp Fatima's. "Let's pray so. Lord Jesus..."

Chapter 17—Lincoln Park

At seven in the morning, Fatima donned jeans, sweatshirt, and tennis shoes. She loaded a backpack with sandwiches, bottled water, and a map of Chicago. Shrugging into the straps, she hurried to catch the El downtown and then a bus north toward Lincoln Park.

Studying the map as the bus jostled along, she made a discovery that sent goose bumps from the back of her neck to the tips of her fingers. Lincoln Park wasn't just a park, it was a community. And Chad's street, West Belden, ran like an arrow straight through it toward the park.

Sancha, you're a genius!

She decided to make a detour to find his house first and knock on the door, before searching the park.

A frizzy-haired lady, bundled in too many layers for the season, boarded the bus and made her way down the aisle. As she came abreast, her face broke into a crooked-toothed smile. "Doctor? Mind if I sit beside you?"

Fatima scooted toward the window, searching her memory to place the face.

"You remember me, don't you, dearie? You treated me in April. My hysterectomy."

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Perryman, isn't it? So, how are you feeling today?"

Mrs. Perryman's shoulders sagged as if under a heavy weight. "Sad. Cheeky died two days ago."

"Who?"

"My faithful companion of twelve years."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Fatima's heart went out to her. "May the Lord comfort you."

"I don't know how I'll get along without her." Mrs. Perryman shook her head.

Her?

"Without her purring at the foot of my bed."

A *cat*. Fatima choked and struggled to keep from laughing.

Mrs. Perryman slapped her on the back. "Careful. Are you all right, dear?"

"Yes, yes."

Two stops later, Fatima disembarked. Sticking to plan, she hurried north along the park's border to Belden Avenue, then west until she came to Chad's address, four blocks away. There she found an apartment building and tried the door, but it required an access code to get in. She circled around, wondering what story to tell management—some compromise between truth and expediency—so she could get in and knock on his door.

A gunmetal-gray canvas car roof caught her attention. Running to it, she found Chad's Jeep. Peering in to make sure, she spotted his tackle box. This discovery thrilled and disheartened her at the same time. Thrilled, because it confirmed that Chad was still in Chicago, not at Juliette's cabin. Disheartened, because it meant he had spent the night in his apartment, yet chosen not to return her call.

But what did I expect? Didn't I come hoping to find him? So, go do it.

The sight of the windshield gave her an idea, terrifying in its humility, tempting in its boldness. She removed her backpack and dug out a pen and

notepad. Then, leaning against the fender like a meter maid, she steadied her trembling hand and wrote:

*TICKET FOR BREACH OF
ETIQUETTE*

When a lady calls, tearful with apologies, a gentleman returns her call and hears her out. Failing to do so, said gentleman owes a word of explanation. Deadline for regulating this fine is seven days. After that date, the distraught lady will have no alternative but to seek consolation elsewhere.

As a kind, noble gentleman once said, that would be a crying shame.

Fatima. 312-555-8824

Folding the paper, she looked heavenward for courage and stuck it under the wiper blade. Then she hurried away, lest she change her mind.

On her return walk down Belden Avenue, she kept her eyes peeled for a sidewalk café. Or rose garden. Or some other hideaway Chad might have stopped in to meditate. Nothing.

She soon found herself in the park itself—at a circular fountain with nude figures, fish, and birds spouting water. Looking around, she was overwhelmed by the size of the park. The green on the map had not prepared her for the sea of green stretching endlessly before her. Even if Chad were here, how would she find him?

The laughter of a child splashing in the water at the fountain's edge mocked her. So did the gurgling sound of water spouting from a bird's beak. Fatima fought back her discouragement and selected the path heading south, toward the Hancock Building. Scanning the lawns and gardens as she went, she hunted for a lock of Chad's blond hair or a flash from his gold-colored frames.

At the zoo, she approached a redhead pushing a baby stroller. "Ma'am, can you give me directions to the bird house?"

"Sure." The mother turned and pointed. "It's that old-fashioned-looking brick building over there."

"Thanks."

Fatima skipped ahead hopefully and entered the bird house only to be greeted by a cacophony of bird noises that could hardly be conducive to meditation. Retreating, she exited the zoo area and resumed her search along quiet paths.

Five hours later, exhausted and discouraged, Fatima sat on a flat stone ledge beside the Alfred Caldwell Lily Pond and nibbled at her last sandwich. Surely by now, she reasoned as she stared morosely at the dark waters, Chad had returned to his Jeep and seen the note. He would not have walked the park's paths all day as she had, or stayed cooped up in his apartment until now. No, he had seen her note, yet chosen not to call. It was over.

She had given it her best and failed. Ask, seek, knock, Jesus said. She had asked God with all her heart. Sought Chad everywhere she knew. No, she hadn't knocked on his door. She needed the access code for that, but she had no heart to pursue the matter further.

All that remained was admitting defeat and accepting Stuart's standing offer.

Why, she asked herself for the zillionth time, did Chad appear at the wrong moment to see her kiss Stuart's cheek? And why, if he wasn't God's choice, had Chad appeared at right moment to take her out in Barry's place? Two coincidences canceling each other out. No, two fateful moments to tantalize her with the prospect of romantic love—only to snatch it away again.

And why, she couldn't help but ask even though

it felt disloyal to Chad, did he have to jump to the wrong conclusion and seal his heart against her? Until then he had seemed so easygoing, so unperturbed by minor things that went wrong. It was the first thing that had impressed her about him. But now, to go into a deep sulk over an impulsive kiss? She didn't understand.

Fatima watched the geese swimming peacefully and envied their calm.

At least she had tasted love's madness before settling down to mother Stuart's children. Yet, was it for this she had slaved in the classroom, library, and hospital?

A tear rolled down her cheek. Eight years of bearing a heavy load now took its toll. She had no coping power left. Mourning the death of her dreams, she surrendered her unfulfilled desires to Jesus and asked for grace to endure.

Chapter 18—Hospital Cafeteria

With growing apprehension, Fatima watched her attending physician, Dr. Oglethorpe, thread his way through the cafeteria, his eye upon her, no cup of coffee in his hand. She rose in a gesture of respect, habitual since childhood.

He adjusted his tie and smiled, crinkles appearing around his prominent gray eyes. "Were you able to work out your visa problems yesterday?"

For the first time in her life, Fatima blushed at a story she had concocted—sure the good doctor saw right through it. "I did my best."

"That's all any of us can do, even when lives depend on it."

She nodded, understanding his medical meaning yet suspecting some deeper significance.

"Well, all may be resolved soon." He winked and took a seat at a nearby table.

Conversation diminished and several faces turned toward the door. Fatima turned to see what had drawn people's attention and stared openmouthed. Chad!

He carried a bouquet of roses and strode straight toward her as people scooted their chairs out of the way. Joy and incredulity hit Fatima like a storm front; self-consciousness followed like a thunderclap. Never in her life had she been the center of attention like this.

With a humble expression, he held out the flowers. "Please forgive me for taking so long to come to my senses and return."

Still numb with shock, Fatima received the roses with tremulous fingers. "Where were you?"

"Lake Forest, my alma mater."

She looked at him in a daze. "Your what?"

"The college where I got my MBA."

"Oh," she said in awe as her eyes feasted on his face.

"I just got back this afternoon."

"But I saw your Jeep—"

"I know you did." He pulled a note from his pocket. "I'm here to pay the ticket."

"O-o-oh."

He laid a hand on her elbow. "Would you like to continue this conversation in Dr. Oglethorpe's office?"

Fatima nodded, relieved. She had so many questions and didn't want to ask them in front of doctors, interns, nurses, candy stripers—an audience growing larger by the second. She numbly followed Chad through the cafeteria, up the elevator, down the corridor, past Dr. Oglethorpe's secretary, and into a large office.

Chad held out a leather chair for her and seated himself opposite. "I prayed like we agreed."

"So did I. Night and day."

"I asked God for a sign. Did you?" His eyes searched hers eagerly.

"No." *I wanted to marry you no matter what.*

"When I saw you with that man in the deli, I thought it was God's sign that you weren't the right one for me."

Tears stung her eyes. "Oh, no."

"It was the most painful experience of my life," he said huskily. "So I ran. Even when I heard you calling, I ran."

Compassion melted her heart, reducing her voice to a whisper. "What brought you back?"

"Two things. Thinking it over, I realized that I couldn't live without you. And my campus minister, Rev. Heilman, convinced me that what I saw wasn't God's sign, because it had nothing to do with the fleece I had laid before Him."

"Fleece?" she asked, eager to comprehend and treasure every word.

"The sign I asked God to give me if you were meant for me."

"What sign was it?"

Chad dropped his gaze toward the floor. "That you would confess your love for me first."

"Oh, but I do love you." Her pent-up emotions poured out in a rush. "With all my heart. Never have I felt love like this for anyone. Forget Ibrahim; that was nothing like what I feel for you. I love you, Chad, only you. Please don't let it be too late to tell you that."

"But you did." He waved her note. "You said on the phone that I was the one you cared for, not the other guy. And you wrote here that it would be a crying shame if you had to seek consolation elsewhere. If that's not a confession of love, I don't know what is." He beamed. "Rev. Heilman was right. He told me to go back and face my fate like a man."

Fatima's heart burst with joy. "So, you believe me?"

"Yes, and I want you to believe me. I love *you*, Fatima. I've loved you ever since I first saw you."

Her head spun with confusion and wonder. "But how could you? You didn't know me."

"Crazy, isn't it? But from the moment you came into my office I wanted you." He gulped. "I mean I wanted to approach you, ask you out, and get to know you."

"Why didn't you?"

Chad shook his head. "I was too scared. It took me a long time to work up the courage."

She grinned. "So how long is it going to take for you to work up courage again?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's only six days left before—"

"Right." He stood, took the flowers from her hand and laid them on the desk. Then, dropping to one knee, he took both her hands.

Recognizing the posture from satellite soaps, she suppressed her laughter and waited happily.

"Please, Fatima, I beg you. Won't you marry me?" He blinked and spoke faster. "I don't have a ring to give you, not yet. But we can go shopping for it together. Okay? Please say yes."

She giggled. "Yes, I will go shopping with you."

The play of emotions across his face was a sight to behold.

"Yes," she amended softly. "I'll marry you. But why—?"

Leaping up, he pulled her to her feet and kissed her full on the lips, sending waves of joy throughout her body.

"Why what?" he murmured close to her ear.

"Why didn't you propose on the way home from the lake? If you already knew you loved me?"

"I was afraid. Of your saying yes only to get a green card and then divorcing me. I knew I couldn't bear that."

Fatima remembered Stuart expressing a similar fear. This time she didn't react with indignation but compassion. *How insecure men must feel with marriages so fragile in America.* She gently pushed him away and looked into his eyes. "Chad, listen to me."

He adjusted his crooked frames. "Yes?"

"I love you with all my heart. But if that should ever change—if my love should somehow diminish—"

Fatima's Fate

then I will look to Jesus to restore my love for you. And make it stronger than ever. Because I love Him most of all and want to please Him. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, my darling. What a wonderful woman you are. I can't believe all this is happening to me."

"Neither can I. Let's go tell Pastor Marks."

He took her arm, led her past curious glances and congratulatory remarks, out of the building, and to his un-ticketed Jeep.

Chapter 19—Wedding Day

7:00 a.m. Chicago time, Fatima called the bank in Nouakchott where Tarak worked. His secretary told her to hold. She sipped her tea and waited. A moment later, Tarak came on the line, and they exchanged the traditional greetings.

“Please forgive me for what I’m about to say,” she finally said.

“Forgive? I don’t understand. Excuse me—” He spoke in a muffled voice to someone. “Go ahead, we can speak freely now.”

“I’m sorry that I can’t tell you this face to face.”

“Then wait until we see each other in Paris. It’ll just be a few days.”

“No, that’s why I’m calling. I won’t be coming to Paris to meet you, Tarak. You are a fine person with noble ambitions, but I can’t marry you. I’m the wrong woman—”

“Fatima, stop this foolish talk.” His tone became impatient and stern. “You know as well as I do that everything has been arranged. Our wills do not matter, only Allah’s. Whatever your fears or reservations, we can resolve them in Paris.”

“No, Tarak. I’m sorry. I do not love you and cannot—”

“Love? What’s come over you, Fatima?” He groaned. “Obviously, you’ve spent too long in that fleshpot called America. Allowed its decadent

notions to confuse you. The imam tried to warn your father, but he didn't listen. And now it's too late. Too, too late."

The sadness of his voice convinced Fatima that he understood. She searched for words to soften the blow.

Click. Someone or something had broken the connection. She stared at the phone in dismay, contemplating whether to call him back, but decided against it. *Nothing I can say will help.*

She waited for him to reconnect, if he wished. One minute, two, three. They seemed to pass slowly, but she wanted to be fair. When five full minutes had elapsed, she rose from the table and went for a walk to clear her mind, determined not to let anything spoil her wedding day.

As she passed by Washington Park, a wild parrot squawked and flew up into a tree. She laughed, remembering what Sancha had told her about these birds; Americans kept them caged, but these had broken free and thrived in spite of efforts to remove them from the park.

Fly free, my friends, in your adopted country.

Wearing a long white cotton dress on which Sancha had embroidered sandpipers, Fatima stood before Pastor Marks in his office with Chad at her side. Sancha stood at her left as one witness. Chad's best friend, Bill, stood at his right as the second witness. Susan, the friendly woman from Human Resources and also Bill's wife, completed the party of six.

Pastor Marks read a few verses of Genesis, recounting the story of Abraham's servant selecting a bride for Isaac. Fatima listened entranced, wondering what Isaac must have felt first as victim of the Mount Moriah sacrifice, his life spared at the last second; then as groom, waiting in suspense to

see the chosen bride and then falling in love with her on the spot.

Chad turned and took her hand, looking as awestruck as she felt. "I, Clarence, take you, Fatima..."

In all the soaps she had watched, never had she imagined the thrill she felt at this moment, nor dreamed that God's will could be so personal and tailored to her needs.

Pastor Marks' verbal prompt broke her from the trance. She clasped Chad's hand and looked into his sky blue eyes.

"I, Fatima, take you, Clarence..."

She pronounced each word distinctly, making sure that no I.C.E. investigation could fault the legality of the proceeding. Chad's adoring look broke into a grin when she finished, as if he could not believe until that moment that she was truly his. She wanted to jump into his arms to reassure him with many kisses, but decorum held her back.

"You may kiss the bride," Pastor said at last, and she restrained herself no longer.

Chad's fervency matched hers, and she lost herself in his tender caress until Sancha's "hallelujah" reminded her witnesses were watching. She broke from his embrace and accepted hugs from everyone.

Susan, the last to greet her, kissed her cheek and whispered, "Chad waited a long time for the right woman to come along. And here you are. Make him happy—"

Fatima nodded, fully intending to do just that.

"—as I'm sure he'll make you happy."

Nodding again, Fatima wondered why Susan took such interest in Chad's happiness. *Did they date?* She pulled back. "How long have you known him?"

"Oh, five years, no, six. Ever since we moved to

Chicago. Bill started inviting him over for home-cooked meals." Susan rolled her eyes. "And guess who he expected to cook them?"

Fatima laughed. "Then you and Bill will have to come over for dinner sometime, so we can even the score."

Chad took her by the waist and pulled her close. "Hey, what are you girls plotting?"

Pastor Marks cleared his throat and handed Chad a signed document. "You'll want to take good care of this and notify the U.S.C.I.S. immediately of the change of Fatima's status."

"Yes, our lawyer"—Chad winked toward Bill—"will assist us in the procedure."

Chapter 20—Late Arrival

Lying in bed, Fatima stared at the ceiling and listened to her husband warble in the shower. A light tap sounded on the front door then a vaguely familiar female voice called, “Chad, are you there?”

Fatima hopped up, tightened her bathrobe as she exited the bedroom, and remembered whose voice it was just before she opened the front door. “Hi, Juliette, come in. My husband will be right with you.”

Juliette gaped.

“Oh, Willy,” Fatima sang out, “Better dress quickly. We’ve got our first visitor.”

“Be right there, Fougou.”

Fatima removed her husband’s shirt from the overstuffed chair. “Won’t you sit down?”

Juliette slumped and moaned. “I see I’m too late.”

“Late for the wedding perhaps, but not for the cake.” She ducked into the kitchenette. “I’ll cut you a piece.”

Drying his hair with a towel, Chad entered the living room. “Juliette, what a pleasant surprise. I tried to phone you at the lake but got no answer.”

Juliette murmured a reply, but Fatima couldn’t hear it. She hastened back and handed her guest a generous portion of the store-bought sponge cake. “Would you like some bubbly cider to go with?”

Seconds elapsed before Juliette responded. She received the plate with shaky hands and shook her head. "No, I don't even want this."

Fatima took it back.

"Oh, Chad, I've been such a fool." Juliette sighed. "I came here to warn you that Fatima was only after a green card, but I can see now that it's more."

"You were right to come, if you thought I was in trouble, and I appreciate it. But Fatima informed me of her problem long ago, and we prayed for God's direction." Chad shot Fatima an adoring look. "And He gave us a sign."

Juliette rose, a bit pale and unsteady, and fished keys from her purse. "Forgive me for intruding on your honeymoon."

"I'll accompany you to your car," Chad said, opening the door for her. "Where are you parked?"

After the door closed, Fatima stared at it and listened to the fading voices. She marveled at God's grace in giving her such a considerate husband. She returned the uneaten portion of cake to the kitchen then busied herself with straightening his apartment—their apartment—and waited impatiently for his return.

Chapter 21—The Parents

Fatima gripped Chad's hand and watched the arriving passengers emerge from the customs area. Her father's turban came into view then his dark eyebrows and piercing eyes, fixing her in his gaze. No pleasure showed on his face at seeing her, only determination. Her heart sank. Behind him walked her mother, eyes down as if searching for invisibility, not her.

"Young man, I wish to speak to my daughter alone."

"Yes, sir." Chad backed off a few paces, sober-faced but with a twinkle in his eyes.

Without any greeting, her father demanded, "Is that the man who changed your mind about Tarak?"

Fatima willed her eyes to meet his gaze. "No, another Man did."

"Who?"

"Prophet Isa."

Mother burst into tears. Chad rushed up with a handkerchief. "Mother Dede, use this."

Her father snatched it from his hand and scowled at Fatima. "What did he say?"

She translated it into Hassaniya, although she suspected her father had understood perfectly.

He thrust the handkerchief back to Chad. "She is not your mother."

"Sorry, please excuse the faux pas," Chad said,

returning the handkerchief to his pocket. "I haven't learned Mauritanian ways yet. What shall I call her?"

"You should not address her at all."

"My apologies, Mr. Dede. I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Father, Mother." Fatima took Chad's arm possessively and pulled him closer. "This is my husband, Clarence Chadwick."

Mother cried out to Allah, buried her face in her shawl, and wept. Father moved his mouth speechlessly.

Fatima hurried on. "We married three days ago. I tried to phone you, but you had already left Nouakchott."

With a stony gaze and steely voice, Father spit the words out. "Are you saying that you converted and married a Christian?"

"Yes, Jesus saved me and introduced this wonderful—"

Father cut her off and took Mother's arm. "You will never see my face again. Come, Samira, we're leaving."

Not budging, Mother turned to Fatima with mournful eyes. "Oh, my daughter, joy of my heart, what have you done? You have betrayed your family, your people, your religion. You are lost to us for all eternity. You have broken my heart."

Chad held Fatima close. She drew strength from his support and said, "I will never stop loving you, Mother, nor stop praying to God for our reconciliation."

"Allah does not hear the prayers of an apostate," Father declared and hustled Mother off.

Chad appeared thunderstruck. "Wh-where are they going?"

Fatima could hardly get the words out. "They're returning to Mauritania."

“But, but—” Chad released Fatima and ran toward her parents. “Mr. Dede, you haven’t seen your daughter in years, won’t you stay for at least one day? Let us show you around the hospital where she’s treated so many patients.”

Her father pivoted. Fatima watched him level a menacing gaze on Chad. She held her breath.

“Young man, she is no longer our daughter. What she does is no longer any concern of ours. I curse the day of her birth.”

Wooziness overcame Fatima. The airport floor seemed to tilt, and all the people swirled around her head.

Fatima woke to the sound of her mother’s voice. She glanced around. “Where am I?”

“Your husband carried you here. It’s some kind of lounge.”

“Where is he?” Fatima sat up and searched the dimly-lit room, puzzling over Mother’s presence and Chad’s absence.

“He’s helping your father with the luggage.”

Fatima’s voice rose hopefully. “Then, you’re staying?”

“No, we’re returning to Paris on the next flight out.”

“Oh, Mother,” she cried in despair. “Will I never see you again?”

“Your father would never allow it, but—” Glancing around surreptitiously, Mother fished a paper out of her purse and whispered, “Your husband said something about videos. I don’t understand.”

Fatima smiled as she read: *youtube.com—search “Fatima Chadwick news”*

Fatima explained how to go into the Internet café, log onto the website, and search for postings.

“Oh, Fati, what a thoughtful husband you have.”

A wistful look stole over her face. "If only he were Muslim."

"He loves God very much and prays every day."

Mother grasped Fatima's hand and pled with her eyes. "Would you do something for me?"

"Anything, Mother."

"Post a video of your first baby."

Fatima felt as if the heavens had opened and a ray of God's glory flooded in. "Oh, Mother, I will send you much more than that. Just keep searching on my name."

The door opened and her father stepped in with an expression Fatima couldn't read—could it be embarrassment? She looked to Chad. He struggled to maintain a sober look, but the corners of his mouth hinted at a secret triumph.

"Come, Samira, everything has been arranged for our departure." Father held the door open for Mother and then nodded toward Chad just before it closed. "Thanks to this young man."

Fatima waited until the door closed, then she looked at her sweetheart in stunned incredulity. "What did you do?"

He grinned. "When Air France refused to exchange his tickets, because no equivalent seats were available on today's flight, your father flew into a rage."

"Oh, no. Poor Father."

"Security rushed over, ready to haul him away. But I pled with them to make allowances for his shock and grief."

"You told them about my conversion?" Fatima asked incredulously.

Chad's grin widened. "No, I said that he had come all the way from West Africa to visit his daughter, only to learn that he'd lost her and would never see her again. They fell over themselves expressing their condolences, and Air France found

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him two seats in first class.”

Fatima hugged him tightly and giggled. “My hero.”

About the Author

Dana studied the romance genre during his eighteen years as a missionary in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Now in retirement, he writes contemporary romances that incorporate the spiritual drama of 21st-century realities. He frequents Christian writer conferences and weekly critique sessions. In his spare time, he also teaches at Trinity Life Bible College in Sacramento and participates in his local church's community outreach.

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