

ACCLAIM FOR *THE PROMISE*



THE PROMISE

ALSO BY BETH WISEMAN

THE DAUGHTERS OF THE PROMISE NOVELS

PLAIN PERFECT

PLAIN PURSUIT

PLAIN PROMISE

PLAIN PARADISE

PLAIN PROPOSAL

PLAIN PEACE

THE LAND OF CANAAN NOVELS

SEEK ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART

THE WONDER OF YOUR LOVE

HIS LOVE ENDURES FOREVER

NEED YOU NOW

THE HOUSE THAT LOVE BUILT

THE PROMISE

BETH WISEMAN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO



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TO LAURIE. A BRAVE —
AND GENTLE — SOUL.



PROLOGUE

TWELVE YEARS EARLIER

Mallory slipped into her cousin's hospital room and tiptoed to the side of her bed. Today, about to burst with good news, she barely noticed the antiseptic smell. She sat down in the chair by the bed and scooted close.

“Hey, Kels. You awake?”

Kelsey opened her brown eyes. This was the third time she'd been admitted in the past two months. “Just resting. The doctor says I can go home tomorrow. They're just monitoring me. My blood pressure got too low again after dialysis.”

Mallory nodded. They'd been through this before. She handed Kelsey a McDonald's bag. “I checked with the nurse. She said you can have this.”

PROLOGUE

Kelsey smiled. “What would I do without you?”

Even worse . . . what would I do without you?

Mallory and Kelsey had been born three days apart, in this very hospital, and Mallory felt closer to her cousin than to her own sister.

Kelsey held the bag in her lap, but she didn’t open it.

“Feeling nauseous?” Mallory asked. “Maybe you’ll feel like eating it later.”

Kelsey put the bag on the table next to her. “I’m sure I will. You know the food here is awful.” She sighed. “I hate this. I know the dialysis is keeping me alive, but I’m so sick of feeling sick.”

“You’ll be better soon, Kels, I promise.”

“You can’t promise that. Unless I get a donor—”

“I can’t wait another minute!” Mallory reached across the bed and latched onto Kelsey’s hand. “I’m not supposed to say anything until I talk to Mom and Dad, but . . .”

Kelsey sat up in the bed, tears filling her eyes. “Are you . . . are you a match?”

Mallory nodded, tears running down her face as well. She had made it through the third round of testing—the only one out of all the friends and family.

“Yes! They just called me on my cell.” She threw her arms around her cousin. “I can give you a kidney!”

CHAPTER ONE

Mallory handed Rosa her empty plate. “As usual, dessert was awesome.” The food was what kept the mandatory Sunday dinners at her parents’ house bearable.

Rosa nodded. Though her dark hair was now speckled with gray, her smile still revealed her girlish dimples and laugh crinkles around her bright eyes. “Glad you liked it, Munchkin.”

Mallory smiled at the maid’s use of the pet name after all these years.

Rosa went around the table to pick up dessert plates, but Mallory’s sister, Vicky, was still working on her key lime pie. Though Mallory missed seeing Haley and Braiden, who were with their father today, she was glad Vicky’s children weren’t present in case things were about to get ugly.

“Mom, Dad . . . there’s something I need to tell you.” Mallory’s stomach churned and her voice was shaky.

Her mother set down her wineglass. Mallory was pretty sure she'd seen Rosa fill it four times.

"What is it?" Her mother raised her eyebrows. Eyebrows that seemed to be higher up on her forehead. And the tiny lines of time that feathered from each of her eyes had disappeared as well. Mallory was studying the changes, not sure if she liked them or not, when her mother cleared her throat. "What do you need to tell us, Mallory?"

She swallowed hard. "I'm donating one of my kidneys."

Her father sat taller, his eyes sharp and assessing. Vicky halted her fork midway to her mouth, glancing back and forth between their parents. Her mother slammed a palm against the table, shaking the dishes that hadn't yet been cleared.

"No! We're not going through this again." Mom shook her head as she glared at Mallory.

"Mom, I'm an adult. And I've made my decision."

Her mother put her empty wineglass on the table, then pointed a finger at her daughter. "I knew this was why you took a job working for that man. This has never been about utilizing your business degree."

Mallory looked at her father. "Dad, please tell me you understand why I want to do this."

Her father leaned back against his chair and sighed. "Of course I understand, Mallory. But it's a dangerous procedure, and you're our daughter. You need to understand how we feel too."

"I get that, Dad. I really do. But I'm going ahead. I've signed up in a paired kidney exchange program."

Mallory's mother blinked her eyes a few times as she raised

her chin. “This isn’t the only way to help. Do you have any idea how much money I have collected over the years through fund-raisers? Money specifically for the Kidney Foundation.”

“Mom.” Mallory sighed. “That’s wonderful. But this isn’t a problem that you can just throw money at. People have to make real sacrifices to save lives.”

“Did that Muslim put you up to this?” Her mother looked around for Rosa, then pointed at her glass again.

“That is beyond offensive.” Mallory glared at her. “I’m going to write that comment off to the wine.”

“They *do* all hate us, you know.” Vicky eased a piece of pie onto her fork. “We’re all infidels to them. They want us all dead.”

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Mallory said to her sister. “Ismail is a doctor. He’s in the business of saving lives, not taking them.”

“That’s enough.” Dad lifted both his palms, and after he slowly lowered them, he said, “We can’t control what you do, honey.”

Not this time.

“But we want to make sure you’ve thought this through.” He laid his napkin on his plate.

Mallory blinked back tears. “I’ve had twelve years to think it through. And I made a promise to Kelsey.”

TATE SLID OFF THE PIANO BENCH AND WENT TO THE door. “Why don’t you use your key, babe?” he asked, stepping aside so Mallory could come in.

She leaned up and kissed him. "Because I don't live here."

"Then move in." He smiled, knowing what she would say. He'd asked plenty of times.

Mallory sat down on the couch and leaned her head back, giving her blond waves a toss. She closed her eyes. "Your mother would have a fit."

Tate made a quick scan of the room and found ET curled up in the corner behind the rocking chair. Twice the orange-and-white tabby had mistaken Mallory's hair for a plaything when she'd draped it over the back of the couch.

"She'd get over it. You know she loves you." Tate sat down beside her. "So how'd it go?"

Mallory inhaled a big gulp of air, blew it out slowly, and turned to face him. She pulled all her hair over her right shoulder and started braiding it. Tate knew she'd braid it to the end, undo it, and run her fingers through it. Then probably braid it again. It was something she did when she was nervous or upset.

"It went about how I figured it would. Mom went nuts, Vicky made a stupid comment, and Dad tried to keep the peace."

Tate reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I know you don't want me to do this either. But at least you understand, right?"

Tate kicked his shoeless feet up on the coffee table. "Yeah, I understand. But you blame yourself too much. You were only seventeen. Your parents made the decision."

She was quiet for a while, then sighed. "Maybe I didn't

fight hard enough. Maybe if I'd been more insistent, they would have agreed. And Kelsey would be alive right now."

Tate shook his head. "No. Don't do that to yourself. Your parents made a choice not to let their seventeen-year-old child have major surgery."

"I guess. But I was the youngest one tested. Girls of child-bearing age are never even considered as donors, but since we already knew I couldn't have children, there was no worry about a high-risk pregnancy down the line. I was the perfect person to do it."

Tate waited. He knew about Mallory's condition, of course, and had assured her that it wasn't going to bother him not to have children. If she wanted to adopt someday, fine, but he wasn't sure he was father material anyway. He'd been around kids plenty when he'd taught music at the junior high, and most of his piano students now were children.

"Anyway, no one else was a match. And I had a young, healthy kidney that would have saved Kelsey's life. When I couldn't give that to her, I made a promise that I'd save another life since I couldn't save hers."

"I know. But it wasn't a promise she asked you to make."

Mallory leaned her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her and kissed her on the cheek.

"I want to make a difference."

"You do make a difference, each and every day. Just by being you."

She snuggled in closer. "Do you know how much I love you, Tater Tot?"

Tate grinned. “You know how I feel about that name.” It seemed unmanly not to put up a little resistance.

She looked up at him with her big, blue eyes and batted her lashes. “I think you secretly love it.”

Tate smiled. “Do ya now?”

ET padded across the living room floor, stopping to yawn before he continued on to a small bed in the corner. Tate yawned as well.

“Nap time? I’m guessing you and your mother went to Mass, then to IHOP. You ordered two pancakes and some fruit. And instead of syrup, you put honey on your pancakes.” She nodded toward the front window. “Then you came home and mowed the yard.” She glanced at her watch. “So, this would make it nap time.”

Tate frowned. “Wow. You make me sound so OCD.”

She giggled. “No. Just structured.”

Tate supposed that in comparison to Mallory, he probably was a little obsessive-compulsive. But it gave him comfort to stay organized and on a schedule. Mallory just winged it and lived spontaneously, on the edge.

“But that’s why we complement each other,” she added. “That whole opposites attract thing—maybe there’s something to it.”

“Maybe,” he said, half yawning again. He pulled her closer. “You gonna take a nap with me?” As tired as he was, sleep wasn’t his top priority.

“I’m not tired,” she said with a grin. “But you go ahead.”

What he really needed was a distraction. He glanced at his cell phone on the end table. He’d even kept it on vibrate

during Mass so he wouldn't miss a call. He wasn't sure if no news was good news. Either way, he'd chosen not to say anything to Mallory yet. If he was offered the job in Chicago, it was really going to shake things up for the two of them.

"Why don't you play something for me? Something pretty and soothing," she said softly.

Tate eased his arm from around her and made his way across the small room to his first love: the baby grand that had been a gift from his uncle nearly thirteen years ago. The black finish shone as brightly today as it did back then. He slid onto the bench and lowered his fingers to the keys and played one of the many songs he'd written for Mallory.

Once again she closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the couch.

Tate stopped abruptly when his cell phone started to ring.

"Aren't you going to get that?" She slid to the end of the couch and peered down at the caller ID. "Chicago Academy for the Arts? Why would they be calling you?"

Tate swallowed hard but didn't move. Was calling him on a Sunday afternoon going to be good news or bad?



CHAPTER TWO

Mallory picked up her pace on the treadmill but didn't bother to dab at the sweat beading on her forehead and dribbling down her cheeks.

"Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" Soraya had kept a steady pace alongside, though she'd barely broken a sweat. "You should tell me before you pass out." She turned to Mallory and grinned.

Mallory knew that if anyone could cheer her up, it was Soraya, but still she hesitated.

The two women had met at a Pilates class six months earlier. Soraya was from Lahore, where she'd led a privileged life with her family in Pakistan before moving to the United States ten years ago. She was engaged to Ismail, Mallory's boss, and it was she who'd told Mallory about the job opening in his office.

Mallory wasn't sure her friend would understand her dilemma. She lowered the incline on the treadmill and kicked the speed back a few notches. "Tate might have a job offer in Chicago."

"Oh." Soraya's eyes widened a little. "And of course you would move with him."

Mallory hung her head for a moment before she looked back at her friend. "I—I don't know. I—I love Tate. With all my heart. I can't imagine being with anyone else." She sighed.

"There is a *but* in there somewhere," Soraya said as she smiled again.

"I love my job." Mallory raised her shoulders and lowered them slowly as she reached for the towel she had draped over the handrail.

"Of course you do. Who wouldn't love working for my Ismail?" She winked at Mallory.

"You're right to be proud of him, Soraya. He exudes positive energy in everything he does, and he's a great doctor." Mallory caught her breath as she settled into a steady cooldown. "You know that if something happened—and I did have to quit—I would give Ismail plenty of notice."

Soraya raised a sculpted eyebrow. "I know this. I would tell you that there are many Ismails out there to work for"—she pushed her bottom lip into a pout—"but that would be a lie. However . . . you must ask yourself how many Tates are out there. And, by the way, when am I to meet this fabulous fellow?"

"Soon. The four of us need to get together. And I know you're right. I can't imagine my life without Tate."

Soraya finally slowed down on the treadmill, her thick, dark ponytail bouncing in step with her. “I would follow my Ismail to the end of the earth.” Her dark eyes lit up when she talked about her fiancé.

“Sounds like you are doing exactly that. I know when the wedding is here, but when is the second celebration?” Mallory knew how much effort was going into the two wedding ceremonies Soraya and Ismail were planning. One here in Houston, the other in their homeland.

“Two months after the one here.” Soraya took a sip from her water bottle. Mallory’s had been empty for at least the past ten minutes.

Soraya worked out daily, while getting to Pilates once a week was a struggle for Mallory, and the gym was a hit or miss. She thought about Tate and his exercise ritual.

“Right now I am trying to stay focused on our trip to Italy,” Soraya added.

They were leaving soon, and Ismail had asked Mallory if she could feed his fish while they were away.

“Ismail seems excited about it.”

“Positano is one of my most favorite places in the world, and Ismail has never been there. We considered it for our honeymoon, but we could both use a vacation right now. And Ismail wants to go to Hawaii for our honeymoon.”

Soraya stepped off the platform and picked up her phone from the holding area on the treadmill. “No e-mails. No texts. No missed calls.” She set it back down and smiled. “Good. I don’t want work getting in the way of lunch today. I do believe

there is a crème brûlée with my name on it somewhere.” She brought a hand to her chest and let out a small gasp. “Can you even imagine life without crème brûlée?”

Mallory knew her friend had fasted for Ramadan, so maybe that explained her appetite today. Although, Mallory wasn’t sure she’d ever seen Soraya pass on dessert, and yet she was in great shape. *Note to self—more exercise.*

“It’s my favorite dessert too.” Mallory sighed as she ran her small towel across her face. “But I might as well slap it to my thighs.”

“Life is too short, my friend.” Soraya started toward the locker room. Mallory followed. “Which brings me to another point,” Soraya said over her shoulder. “Why haven’t you and Tate made plans to marry? You’ve been dating four years.”

Mallory was still trying to catch her breath. “Tate wants to get married.”

“And you don’t?” Soraya raised an eyebrow again as she turned and waited for Mallory to catch up.

Mallory shrugged as Soraya opened the door to the dressing and shower room. “I can’t imagine marrying anyone else. Tate is the only man I’ve ever loved. I mean, I dated guys in high school and college, but I never felt anything like this.” She smiled. “Tate is amazing.”

“Hmm . . . I’m not sure you answered my question.”

“Of course I want to marry him. Just not yet. There are things I want to check off my list first.”

“Ismail tells me that you have signed up in the kidney exchange program. He also told me the reason you want to do this. A promise you made to your cousin.” Soraya pulled a bag

from her locker, then moved toward the shower. “So is this one of the things you are checking off your list?”

“Yes.” Mallory looked at the time on her phone and knew she’d need to shower quickly and hurry back to the clinic. She’d sacrificed lunch to work out. “And I don’t want anyone telling me I can’t do it. I’m not saying that Tate could or would forbid me from doing it, but . . .” She paused. “But he isn’t happy about it.”

“I understand that. He loves you, so naturally he is worried. He thinks of you as the mother of his future children, yes?”

“That’s not in the cards, Soraya. I’ve known since I was fifteen that I can’t have children. Tate knows, of course. It doesn’t bother him.”

Soraya stared at Mallory. “You’ve never mentioned that before. I’m sorry, Mallory.”

“I’ve had a long time to get used to the idea.”

Soraya shook her head. “We never know what Allah’s plan for us is.”

Mallory wasn’t sure that God had a plan for her. If He did, He needed to go back to the drawing board and make some adjustments.

THE DOORBELL RANG JUST AS TATE WAS SCOOPING ET his usual ration of dog food. Crazy cat wouldn’t eat anything else. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Verdell. Tate sent up a quick prayer for patience as he crossed the living room.

“Hello, Verdell.” He forced a smile as the boy walked past him, knowing how Verdell would respond.

“Hello, Mr. Webber.” Verdell shuffled to the piano, head hung low, as if he were walking a plank. He put his lesson book against the stand and sat down.

Verdell’s blond hair was cut high above his ears with a noticeable cowlick that caused a few strands to spike on the top of his head. He was a skinny kid at that awkward age, teeth too big for his mouth. And for reasons Tate didn’t understand, Verdell often stole weird things. Little things. Like Tate’s toothbrush one week. And a week before that, a bottle of Visine. At first Tate thought he was imagining it, but they were items he would hardly misplace—and Verdell was the only one of his students who always asked to use the bathroom.

“Did you practice this week?” Tate sat down in his chair next to the piano bench. Verdell had a baby grand at his aunt’s home too—a Steinway. Tate’s dream piano. *For a kid who hates to play.*

“No, I didn’t practice, Mr. Webber.” Verdell sat taller, his chin in the air and his lips clamped tight.

Tate felt sorry for the child. Both his parents had been killed in a boating accident the previous year, and his aunt was raising him. Tate had told Chantal that she was wasting her money by sending her nephew for lessons, that Verdell had no interest in the piano despite the potential for being good at it. But Chantal begged Tate to keep trying.

Verdell settled his hands on the keys, looked at the music in front of him, then played every note and rhythm perfectly. Like a machine without an ounce of passion for the music.

Tate stood up and paced as he rubbed his forehead. “Do you want to try an exercise in a different book?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Verdell turned the page and started playing the easy song in front of him. When he was done, he put his hands at his sides. “What now?”

Tate knew he needed to try a different approach. One of the reasons he’d quit his job as a band director was so that he could focus exclusively on piano. He’d dreamily assumed that his private students would all come to their lessons with excitement and a passion for the craft. He sighed as he thought again about the job possibility in Chicago. It would put him back in a classroom setting, but the students were all gifted players who’d fought hard for one of the coveted spots. Mallory hadn’t said much when he’d told her about it. Lots to consider for both of them.

“Verdell, I know you hate coming here.” Tate decided to just throw it out there and see what happened.

Verdell kept his eyes straight ahead. “Chantal needs time to have her hair done on Mondays. Sometimes her nails. Sometimes a massage.” He shrugged. “Or whatever else she likes to do.”

Tate had suspected as much. He was being paid to babysit for an hour a week.

“Why do you hate the piano so much?”

“I never said that.” Verdell twisted sideways on the bench until he was facing Tate.

“So what interests you?”

Verdell glanced toward the window. “Driving your car interests me.”

BETH WISEMAN

Tate looked out the window at his white Toyota, then grinned when he saw the hint of a smile on the boy's face. "Driving *my* car, or just any car?"

"Any car would be okay."

"Well, you're not old enough to drive. What else?"

Verdell shrugged. "That's about it, I guess."

Verdell turned the page, placed his hands on the keys, and pounded out the next song in the book, each methodical stream of notes like a vise tightening around Tate's head. In a survival method he'd learned early on in his teaching career, Tate allowed himself to check out, this time drifting into a world of what-ifs.

What if I get the job? What if I don't get the job? What if I ask Mallory to marry me and go with me? Will she say yes? What if she says no?



CHAPTER THREE

Ismail checked his roster for the day, then glanced at his watch. He had about thirty minutes before his first patient was scheduled, so he picked up his niece's medical report to study. Abdul had e-mailed it only this morning, but his cousin had already called twice to get Ismail's feedback. Ismail planned to have a hematologist look it over, but at first glance it did appear that Majida's leukemia was at an advanced stage.

His cell phone vibrated on his desk, and he glanced at the ID and sighed.

"Hello, Abdul. I'm just now looking over the report."

His cousin started speaking to him in Urdu. Ismail interrupted him. "Abdul, you're going too fast. I can't understand you."

"News for my Majida is not that of good you will tell me."



Ismail was used to delivering bad news, but it was always more difficult when it was family. And even more so when it was a child.

“I’m going to have a specialist look at Majida’s report, a hematologist. But it does look like her condition is quite serious.” He rubbed his forehead. The sixteen-year-old was unlikely to get good health care in Peshawar. But money talked in Pakistan, and if Majida was going to have a chance at survival, Abdul was going to need money. And lots of it. Even though Ismail hadn’t seen his cousin in fifteen years, he couldn’t imagine that Abdul had worked his way into a better financial situation. There just wasn’t much opportunity in their homeland, and Ismail lived each day feeling fortunate and blessed that he was no longer there.

“Abdul, I think you should bring Majida to the United States for treatment.” Ismail spoke slowly. “Is she well enough to travel? Is this something you or Fozia might be able to do?” He stood up and walked to the window. Opening the blinds, he could see the medical center from his office. “There is a hospital here called MD Anderson. It is the best facility in the world for Majida to receive treatment. Texas Children’s Hospital is another possibility. It is also here in Houston. The Children’s Hospital usually doesn’t turn anyone away.”

After a few moments of silence, Ismail said, “Abdul, I can purchase plane tickets for either you or Fozia to bring Majida here.”

His cousin started speaking in Urdu again, but Ismail was only getting bits and pieces.

“Abdul, Abdul. You are going too fast again.”

His cousin slowed down and spoke to him in chopped English, explaining the reasons he couldn't get travel visas for himself and Majida. Ismail knew that it was hard to get out of Pakistan these days, much harder than when he'd left prior to 9/11.

"Does that apply to Fozia as well?" He wasn't sure if it was any easier for a woman to get a visa to the United States. Sometimes an American could sponsor someone from Pakistan, but neither Ismail nor Soraya would be a candidate since they weren't born in the United States. Even then, sponsorship often took months. Ismail wasn't sure Majida had that long.

"It is with a sad heart that marriage to Fozia is no longer. We divorced."

Ismail stiffened. Divorce among Muslims was rare. To divorce in their homeland, the person seeking the separation only had to say, "I divorce thee," three times, and it was done. But it didn't happen very often since a man was allowed to have more than one wife.

"I am sorry to hear this, Abdul." He knew that Abdul and Fozia's marriage had been arranged by their families, but he assumed that over the years Abdul had grown to love her.

"She will live on third floor with children. And as I am expected, I provide to children and her."

Ismail had been here long enough to know all about divorces in America. They were often very ugly, and no man would ever live in the same house with the woman he was divorcing. But in his home country, a Muslim man was expected to take care of his ex-wife for the rest of his life.

“This is hard news to hear. I wish you the grace of Allah during these troubling times. Did you consider *jirga*?”

Ismail’s great-aunt and great-uncle had been part of a *jirga* when they were having troubles. Ismail was just a young boy at the time, but he still remembered the gathering of the tribal elders to decide the fate of the couple. What he remembered the most was his aunt crying because she was not allowed to divorce his uncle, and the decision of the elders was always final. Years later, his aunt disappeared.

“Fozia and I are to agree that no *jirga*. Thank you, my cousin, for your nice words. No visa is for Fozia. Rules not allow us in United States.”

“Let me think for a moment.” Ismail walked back around his desk and sat down again. He’d made a successful career as a urologist, but even he didn’t have the kind of money Abdul would need to seek proper care in Pakistan. “Majida is a very sick girl, Abdul. She really needs to come here if she is able. Let me think on this, and I will also talk with my doctor friend who specializes in children with leukemia. Then I will call you.”

“In what time is it for call?”

Ismail thought about his trip to Italy. “I will be going on vacation with my fiancée in a couple days, but I will gather as much information as I can before I go.” There was a knock at his office door. “I must go now. But I will call you again.”

“Mrs. Irvin is here,” Erin said as she peeked her head in. “And Mallory needs you to sign a couple of things at the front desk.”

Ismail nodded at his nurse, his heart heavy with thoughts

of Majida. The last time he'd seen the child, she was only a year old. "Thank you," he said as he stood up. If Abdul couldn't get a visa to come here, the only option was for him to get her the best medical care he could in Pakistan. A nearly hopeless task.

MALLORY LISTENED AS RHONDA IRVIN TOLD HER HOW much pain she was in. The woman was thirty, only a year older than Mallory, and had given her sister a kidney two months before. Ismail said that she apparently didn't have much tolerance for pain and that the surgery had been very successful for both Rhonda and her sister. Mallory wasn't sure if Ismail was just telling her that because he knew she would one day be a donor in the operating room.

"Oh, Rhonda, I'm so sorry. I'm sure Dr. Fahim will give you something to help with the pain," Mallory said, resting her hand on the frosted window that separated her from the waiting room. "He should be with you shortly, okay?"

Rhonda nodded as Ismail walked up behind Mallory.

"Can you sign these, Dr. Fahim?" she asked. In front of patients she addressed him formally, but he'd insisted that she call him Ismail the rest of the time. His two nurses, Erin and Amber, called him Ismail too. They had been with him for years, and both of them had confirmed what Mallory had thought early on—that Ismail was a wonderful doctor and a very kind man.

After fourteen years in the United States, he still had a hint of a Middle Eastern accent. His close-trimmed facial hair reminded her of Tate's, although Ismail's hair was much

shorter and there wasn't a strand out of place. Ismail was smaller than Mallory's muscle-bound boyfriend, but he was a really nice-looking man. They both had that perfect blend of clean-cut with a dash of ruggedness.

The doctor pulled a pen from the pocket of his white coat and scribbled his name in the spots Mallory pointed to. "I see we have a full day today, but when I'm on vacation it will be very quiet here."

Amber would be taking her vacation at the same time. A few patients were scheduled to see Erin for routine follow-ups, and Mallory planned to get caught up on insurance filings. But overall, she was looking forward to a little down time.

Mallory smiled. "We'll see about that."

BY THE TIME SHE GOT TO THE OLIVE GARDEN, MALLORY was pooped. Tate and his mother were waiting for her outside the restaurant. Sweating. July had been brutal, and August was already looking worse.

"So," Regina said after they'd gotten settled at a table and ordered, "Tate said you told your parents that you signed up in the kidney exchange program. Didn't go so well, huh?"

Mallory wasn't sure what Regina's position was on the issue. "No, not really. They feel the same way now as they did when I was seventeen." She paused. "Plus they can't stand the fact that I work for a Muslim. I'd never introduce my parents to Soraya. I'm afraid they'd embarrass me."

They were quiet while the waitress placed salads in front of them. Then Regina reached for Mallory's and Tate's hands.

Tate prayed silently before every meal, which was fine with Mallory, but his mother's out-loud blessings in public made her uncomfortable. She couldn't recall her family ever praying before meals, silently or aloud.

"Amen." Regina let go of their hands and picked up her fork. "You know, Ramadan just ended a few days ago. They don't eat or drink anything during the daylight hours for a month."

Mallory popped an olive into her mouth. "Yeah, I know. Soraya and Ismail are really liberal Muslims, but they do observe Ramadan. And I saw Ismail pulling out his prayer mat more than usual. He usually closes his door, but we've had to interrupt him during prayer a few times."

"I went to a mosque once."

Tate sat taller as he swallowed a piece of bread. "Really, Mom?"

"Yes, I know," Regina said. "It's surprising that this staunch Catholic would do that, but I had a friend who was Muslim. It was before you were born, so it was long before September 11. I'd made a deal with the woman." She paused, frowning. "Good grief, I can't even remember her name. Anyway, I told her I'd go with her to the mosque if she'd attend Mass with me. And she did."

Tate smiled. "Were you trying to convert her?"

Regina shook her head. "Not really. We were both checkers at the grocery store, and we worked the same shift. We became friends and were curious about each other's religion, but neither of us had any interest in converting. I remember a few things about Islam; it's really a very peaceful religion.



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Unfortunately, after what happened in New York and the Pentagon, I think most Americans see Muslims in a different light now.” Regina got quiet. “I wonder what ever happened to her . . .”

“Well, I’m pretty sure that my parents see them all as terrorists.” Mallory sighed.

“The woman I was friends with was a kind and loving person. I can’t seem to remember her name, but I do remember that. I haven’t thought about her in years.”

“Soraya is like that,” Mallory said. “Kind and loving. We’ve gotten to be good friends, and I don’t care what God she prays to.”



TATE WASN’T SURE IF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS prayed to the same God or not. Or Allah, as they called him. Mallory’s casual attitude about the Lord bothered him sometimes, but he wrote it off to the very different ways they were raised. And by the time he and Mallory got back to his place, religious preferences weren’t foremost in his thoughts.



She’d followed him home, and they’d barely crossed the threshold of Tate’s house when he pulled her into his arms. He cupped her cheeks in his hands and covered her mouth with his, and as she responded, Tate edged them toward his bedroom—and was disappointed when she gently held him at arm’s length.

“We need to talk,” she said softly.

Tate sighed, never sure what that meant. “Good talk or bad talk?”



Mallory walked to the couch and sat down. She patted the spot beside her. "It's not really good or bad, I don't think. I mean . . . I just think we need to talk about *us* in the event that you get the job in Chicago."

Tate plopped down on the couch and forced a smile. "Okay. Let's talk."

She grinned. "I know you have other things in mind for this evening, but I really think we should talk about this first."

Tate knew Mallory well enough to know that she was probably still analyzing the situation. This conversation was part of the process, and he doubted much would be resolved tonight. Especially since it would all be speculative. "Okay. So you've been thinking about it. What have you come up with?"

She twisted on the couch and tucked one leg beneath her. "Well, first of all, I have a few questions. Number one . . . if you are offered the job, when would they want you to start?"

"I don't know. Les, the guy I know who teaches there, said he doubted they would make a decision before school starts up in a couple of weeks. So it could be that I wouldn't start until after Christmas. They're actually creating the position because they're expanding. It's not like I'm replacing someone, so I don't think there's a huge sense of urgency."

Mallory tapped a finger to her chin. "Okay, let's just assume you are offered the job."

"Okay." Tate shifted his weight on the couch, eager to hear her thoughts but fearful at the same time.

"You would move to Chicago. I would stay here, and—"

"Wait a minute. I know you love your job, but you

wouldn't move with me? I'm sure there are plenty of jobs for office managers in Chicago, at a doctor's office or anywhere else."

"So my job is less important than yours?"

She smiled, but in Tate's opinion it was one of those thin-lipped smiles women offer up, often in an effort to trip a guy up.

"I didn't say that. But jobs like this for me don't come up very often. I'd be crazy not to jump on it."

She was quiet for a while, and Tate could practically hear the wheels in her head turning.

"I love you, Mallory. If you don't go with me, I won't take the job." His stomach flipped as he said it. *How could I pass this up?*

"Oh no," she said quickly. "Then you would resent me."

"Well, it sounds like you'll resent me if you have to quit your job. So what's the solution?"

They were quiet again. For much longer. Finally, Mallory said, "I'm not relocating with a man I'm not married to."

Oh, thank You, God. Every time he'd hinted to Mallory that he wanted to get married, she'd changed the subject. "Oh, baby." He reached for her hand and squeezed, then brought it to his lips. "I know this isn't the right kind of proposal, but marry me. I didn't think you wanted to get married. Or that you were ready."

The color drained from her face, and Tate was glad he was sitting down.

"That's just it." Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm *not* ready to get married. And I don't know when I will be."

Tate felt the sting of her words, but he willed himself to be calm and took a deep breath. “What does that mean?”

Mallory dabbed at her eye with one finger. “If you get the job in Chicago, Tate, you *have* to take it. I understand how big an opportunity this is. But . . .”

Tate held his breath.

“I won’t be going.”

ISMAIL FLIPPED THROUGH HIS MAIL WITH HIS CELL phone to his ear. When he heard Soraya opening the door with her key, he told his cousin that he needed to go. He hadn’t yet told his fiancée that he had wired Abdul a substantial amount of money to help with Majida’s care in Pakistan. Not nearly enough, but all he could spare right now. He hadn’t been close to his cousin since they were kids, but Abdul was family and it was Ismail’s responsibility to help however he could.

Soraya fell into his arms, and he kissed her gently, then eased her away. “What is the matter, my love? Tell me. What is wrong?”

“Nothing, really,” she said as they walked to Ismail’s black leather couch. “I’m just tired. It was a long day filled with many customers.” Soraya owned a high-end rug shop, and one of her favorites was spread beneath his living room furniture.

She had decorated Ismail’s condo, and the woman had a thing for black, white, and red. But somehow it all worked, and even if it didn’t he would never say so. The forty-gallon

fish tank lent some color to the space. Soraya had filled it with exotic fish, but Ismail forgot to feed them sometimes.

He moved a red throw pillow out of the way as he twisted to face her. Soraya was beautiful inside and out. A silken mass of black hair hung in graceful waves past her shoulders, and her dark eyes were set above high cheekbones against an olive complexion. She looked extra stunning today in a deep purple pantsuit.

After she'd filled him in on her day, he told her about his phone call from Abdul, leaving out the part about the wire transfer.

"Ismail, that makes me so sad." Soraya shook her head. "Is he sure he can't get Majida here for treatment?"

"He says he can't. And I do know it is difficult to get a visa from there to here." He sighed, deciding he didn't want to keep anything from his future wife. "I wired Abdul some money today. Hopefully it will help him find good care for her."

Soraya smiled. "You are a good man."

"I try," he said. He smiled back at her, glad she didn't ask how much.

"Oh, I hired a wedding planner today," she said as she pressed her palms together. "He said eight months isn't long enough to plan the kind of wedding we want, but I explained to him that we are working around Ramadan next July as well as planning two celebrations."

Ismail wished they didn't have to travel so soon after their wedding here, just to have another wedding in Lahore, but it was important to Soraya. "I would think that's plenty of time to plan."

Soraya giggled. “And just how many weddings have you planned?”

Ismail shrugged, grinning. “Not so many.” He leaned over and kissed his future wife. “I know it will be wonderful. Both weddings.” He briefly thought about the cost of two weddings—thankfully, Soraya’s parents were paying for both. Ismail had more money than most, but spending a half million dollars to get married seemed extravagant, even in America. And he wouldn’t have been able to send nearly as much to Abdul if he was paying for the weddings.

“I hear your stomach growling.” Soraya laid her hand across Ismail’s stomach.

“And I’m happy that fasting is over.”

She gave his stomach a gentle pat. “Fasting has been written down upon you as it was upon those before you.”

“Yes, yes,” he said. Soraya came from a very liberal Muslim family in Lahore, but she could cite the Quran better than most people. “Stay with me tonight,” he whispered as he leaned forward and kissed her.

She didn’t answer as she got up off the couch and rounded the corner. Ismail heard the bathroom door close, then listened to his stomach growl some more. During the past month of Ramadan, he wasn’t sure which had been more difficult—abstaining from food during the daylight hours or abstaining from Soraya in the nights. Ismail knew they weren’t the best Muslims in the world, and they seldom went to the mosque. But they did practice the call to prayer five times per day, and they did abstain from things that would be displeasing to Allah during Ramadan.

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Despite the rumbling in his belly, when Soraya came back into the room in a flowing black dressing gown, he was clear about his priorities. The phone vibrating in his pocket was an unwelcome distraction, but he was a doctor, so he pulled it out and checked the caller ID. He quickly pressed Ignore, stood up, and walked toward his beautiful Soraya, with no plans to return his father's call. The man still terrified him. Even from across the world.