



If I Should Speak

A NOVEL

Book One in If I Should Speak trilogy

Special Edition

Umm Zakiyyah



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A Novel



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AL-WALAA
PUBLICATIONS

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Book One in *If I Should Speak* trilogy

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Preface to Special Edition

Dear reader,

I want to offer my sincerest thanks to you for joining me on my writing journey. When I completed *If I Should Speak* in 2001, I could have never imagined how many lives the story would touch. Today the book is read all over the world, and I'm humbled and grateful for this immense blessing.

During interviews and book discussions, I'm often asked what inspired me to write *If I Should Speak*, a story about a young Christian college student who learns about Islam for the first time through a religion class assignment. I myself am the daughter of American converts to Islam, and like the main character in this story, my parents were raised Christian and never imagined that their lives would take a different path in adulthood. Also, I have always been fascinated with the spiritual journey of those who happen upon Islam at the most unexpected and inopportune times in life.

When I was in college and living on campus, I was often approached by fellow students who were required in their religion classes to research an unfamiliar faith tradition. Also, my first roommate—who eventually accepted Islam after reading *A Voice*, the sequel to *If I Should Speak*—would ask me questions about my experiences and outlook as a Muslim, and she and I would often stay awake late into the night talking about our lives. I remember during one of these discussions, she said to me, “I can see myself becoming Muslim one day. But not now. I don't think I'm ready now.” And those words touched my heart and stayed with me forever.

I pray that *If I Should Speak* continues to touch lives and hearts, and I pray we all continue to grow personally and spiritually. If you are reading this, it is my personal prayer that you have all that your heart desires and that you are granted it in a way that is better than the best you could imagine or hope for. Thank you for your love and support.

Sincerely,

Umm Zakiyyah





Dedication

*For all who have open minds and hearts and
ever tread the path of life as students.*



*“What is the life of this world
but amusement and play?
But verily the Home in the
Hereafter — that is Life indeed,
If they but knew.”*

—Qur'an, Al-'Ankaboot (29:64)

“You're going to walk the path that God laid out for you through His qadr, with all its sunshine and stormy weather. In this, you have no choice. But you do have a choice whether your heart will be in humble submission only when the sun is shining, and in stormy unrest when it is not. Or you can be in humble submission always, even when it hurts. But either way, dear soul, you're going to walk that path that God has written for you—as you are right now.”

—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah



❏ One ❏

“I’m tired of this!” Tamika kicked her dormitory room door closed in disgust. Her roommate’s clothes were thrown carelessly about the room. A pair of shorts still lay untouched on her roommate’s desk. They had been there for two days already. Blond hair strands had begun to gather into dust balls under Jennifer’s bed.

Angry, Tamika stormed out of the room, marching down the hall to the resident advisor’s (RA) room to get the vacuum cleaner. She was pounding impatiently on Mandy’s door before she realized it.

The RA quickly opened the door. “What’s wrong?” She gasped, thinking the matter to be an emergency. Her red hair was disheveled, and red imprints stood out against her pale skin. She had been sleeping.

“Sorry to wake you,” Tamika apologized in a calmer tone than her knocking had suggested, “but I need to borrow the vacuum cleaner.”

Mandy rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth, upset for having been disturbed for such a trivial matter. She rolled the vacuum into the hall, and she slammed the door in Tamika’s face without a word. Mandy was so angry that she did not even remember to take Tamika’s student identification card as collateral.

Tamika shrugged, too upset with Jennifer to allow the RA’s rudeness to bother her. Sighing, she rolled the vacuum down the hall. In her room, she took one last look at the disastrous mess before she began cleaning.

Tamika had heard horror stories from her friends who had experienced strenuous roommate situations, but now she was experiencing it firsthand. She had been lucky the year before as a freshman, when she was placed with her now best friend Makisha. However, Makisha now had a single, no roommate, a situation of which Tamika could only dream.

As she vacuumed and organized the room, Tamika thought of Jennifer’s forever broken promises, swearing that she would clean her side of the room. Tamika would usually keep both sides tidy, but Jennifer would complain, stating that it made her feel guilty and promising that she would clean her side from then on.

Today, the two had discussed the uncleanness of the room, and Jennifer had promised that her side of the room would be clean before Tamika returned that afternoon. However, Jennifer was nowhere in sight, and half of the room was untouched, unkempt for yet another day.

Just as Tamika turned off the vacuum, the door opened.

“Oh my God!” Jennifer was saying to her friend Christina as they entered the room. “You’ve gotta be kidding!”

Before Christina could respond, she and Jennifer’s eyes caught Tamika’s icy glare. Jennifer’s dark blue eyes slowly traced every inch of the room, and Tamika’s gaze remained fixed on Jennifer, whose blond hair was pulled casually back in a ponytail and hung just above her shoulders. She was dressed in a navy blue sweatshirt and matching pants and was wearing running shoes. Jennifer’s face was slightly reddened and moist with perspiration, indicating to Tamika that her roommate had been exercising—Jennifer had been relaxing and enjoying herself while she cleaned the room.

“Oh my God,” Jennifer said, cupping her hand over her mouth, remembering just then. “I’m so sorry, Tamika.” She smiled uneasily. “I totally forgot. Oh my God.”

“Yeah,” Tamika agreed sarcastically. ““Oh my God’ is right.” Her stare did not leave her roommate’s face.

“Okay,” Jennifer defended, “I forgot, okay?” She rolled her eyes and waved her hand at Tamika. “Don’t make such a big deal, gosh.”

“I better go,” Christina announced, leaving the room and closing the door without waiting for a reply.

“A big deal!” Tamika exclaimed impatiently.

“Calm down, for God’s sake. I forgot.”

She felt herself becoming hot with anger. “Calm down!” She let her voice descend to a lower tone. “Calm down?” she whispered in disbelief. She held the handle of the vacuum and shook the machine in her tight grip. “You see this, huh? Miss Forgetful? Do you?”

Silence.

“Well, this is what I’ve been doing for the last forty minutes.” Tamika shook her head at a loss for words.

“I told you I’d do it,” Jennifer retorted.

“But did you?”

She rolled her eyes and shoved past Tamika with her shoulders, throwing Tamika off balance momentarily. Jennifer collapsed in her desk chair and groaned, furiously pulling the ponytail holder from her sweat-dampened hair, letting her hair fall comfortably over her shoulders. “I don’t have time for this. I have studying to do.” She opened a book, fumbling through the pages nervously.

“Don’t you ever put your hands on me again,” Tamika hissed through gritted teeth, struggling to calm herself.

“My *hands* didn’t touch you,” her roommate corrected, still facing her book.

“Don’t be funny with me girl. You know exactly what I mean.”

“Okay,” Jennifer said, fed up, abruptly turning in her chair to face her roommate. “Is this about the room or what?”

“No,” Tamika replied, fuming. “This is about your junk everywhere and how I’m tired of you playing Miss Innocent whenever I bring it to your attention.”

Her roommate opened her mouth to say something.

“Don’t say another word to me,” she stopped her. “I don’t wanna hear ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘Oh my God’ come outta your mouth again.”

Frustrated, Jennifer stood, tossed her hair, and picked up the receiver to her phone that sat on a nightstand next to her bed. “I’m calling my mother,” she announced, obviously hurt and upset. Her face grew red, and her eyes began to water.

Annoyed, Tamika dashed over to her roommate and slammed the receiver down before Jennifer could finish dialing. “Oh no you’re not,” she protested. “Not this time.” Her hand was on top of Jennifer’s, pressing forcefully.

Jennifer threw Tamika’s hand off of hers, snatched up the receiver and began dialing again. Tears were now streaming down her cheeks. She hissed the word under her breath, but Tamika had heard.

“What did you say?” Tamika asked incredulously in a whisper. “What did you say?” The question now became a dare.

Her roommate proudly flipped her hair and turned her back to Tamika, intentionally ignoring the question. She carried the entire phone to her bed and held the receiver between her shoulder and ear. “Mom?” she whined into the phone. “Nothing,” she lied to her mother after an inquiry as to what was wrong. “I mean,” she corrected then whispered as if it were an evil word, “*her*.” As Jennifer’s mother comforted her, her crying became uncontrollable, and she sobbed, unable to speak intelligibly.

Tamika did not blink as she stared disbelieving at Jennifer, the filthy word still stinging her ears. Rage built up inside of her, and she struggled to control herself. Never in her life had she heard such a word come out of a White person’s mouth except while watching an old movie—until now.

Before she could even consider the repercussions of her action, Tamika yanked Jennifer’s phone cord from the wall in her frustration and held the end tightly in her fist.

“Mom? Mom?” Jennifer pressed the button on the phone repeatedly. Panicked and immediately realizing what had happened, she jerked around to face Tamika, whose glare was cruel and unmoving.

“What did you say?” Tamika demanded louder than before, now that she definitely had her roommate’s attention.

Jennifer’s shock interrupted her crying, and she slowly set her phone down, staring at her roommate, livid. “That was my mother,” she hissed.

“I asked you a question,” Tamika reminded her. The cord’s end was now causing her palm to sweat with the tight grip.

“That was my mother, you—!” Infuriated, Jennifer was now on her feet, arms swinging wildly at her roommate, her obscenities flying almost as quickly as her arms.

Before Jennifer could take hold of Tamika’s hair, Tamika dropped the cord and caught her roommate’s arms. She then thrust Jennifer away from her in a desperate attempt to protect herself. Jennifer fell into the bed with such force that the bed moved several feet as her heavy body crashed into it. Jennifer let out a scream and again began to shout offenses at Tamika, calling her every accursed name she could think of. A second later, she was on her feet again, charging at Tamika, who again tried to catch her arms, but this time unsuccessfully. Instead, the two fell on the floor, Jennifer on top, pulling and yanking at Tamika’s hair. Somehow Tamika managed to overcome her. Now on top, Tamika pinned Jennifer down, pressing her arms against the floor forcefully to restrain Jennifer’s flying arms.

“Get off me! Get off me!” Jennifer hollered as she realized her defeat, hoping someone would hear.

The sound of a phone ringing came from Tamika’s desk.

Jennifer’s mother.

But no one seemed to hear it.

“Get off me!”

A moment later the door swung open, and Mandy stared at the roommates, stunned. “What on earth is going on in here!” Two other residents rushed into the doorway, panting. “Go call security!” Mandy instructed desperately, her eyes glued to Tamika. Both residents ran in obedience.

The ringing ceased.

Jennifer began to cry again, and for a moment all that could be heard were her sobs and sniffles.

Sensing how the scene must appear to the RA, Tamika slowly removed herself from Jennifer and stood several feet from her roommate.

Mandy quickly ran to Jennifer and knelt beside her, gently holding her hand to help her get up. “Are you okay?”

Sniffling, Jennifer nodded, unable to speak.

Mandy glared at Tamika, her green eyes scolding, shaking her head as if it were a shame as she helped Jennifer to her feet.

“You’re hurt!” Mandy cried as she saw blood on Jennifer’s hand.

Jennifer touched the back of her head again and glanced at her fingers. She was bleeding! “I, I,” she started to say.

“Don’t worry,” Mandy consoled her, glancing disapprovingly at Tamika. “You can tell security.” She paused, looking at both roommates and said, “But now, both of you need to come with me.”

An hour later, Tamika found herself with a conduct charge of phys-

ical assault, a Conduct Board hearing the following evening, and a room to herself for the night. The campus security had asked Jennifer if she wanted Tamika moved to another room that night, but Jennifer declined the offer, stating that she would rather stay with a friend, because she felt unsafe in a room to which Tamika had a key.

Unsafe.

The word echoed in Tamika's head. Unsafe. *Really?* she asked herself as she recounted the entire incident and the conversation with the campus security that had followed. The security personnel had allowed Jennifer to tell an exaggerated version of the story, with no interruptions from Tamika. In her story, Jennifer told of Tamika's alleged prior intimidation and the feeling that at any moment, Tamika would become violent. Whenever Tamika had tried to interject and correct her, she was told, "Quiet, please," by the security officers, who were taking notes on Jennifer's statements. Of course, Mandy's presence made the situation no better.

Mandy explained how she found Tamika on top of a bleeding, screaming, and helpless Jennifer. The RA's vivid recap of the scene rendered even Tamika speechless. Mandy had no idea what had been going on in the room, yet she had much to say. It seemed no one cared to hear Tamika's side of the story. However, they did pretend to listen when the officers asked her to recount her side, a gesture that Tamika sensed was based more on routine than sincere concern for the truth. The blank stares and mechanical nods made it clear to Tamika that the interest was feigned. And despite the sound of pen strokes whistling across the pages of the officers' report as she spoke, it was clear she was talking to herself. It was no use trying to expound upon her version of the incident. She was already guilty in their minds, and her carrying on, as she had started to do, only made her case worse. So she had decided to just call it a night, and she went back to her room.

Presently, Tamika lay in her clean room, staring at the water stained ceiling. The vacuum cleaner stood next to her desk. Its plug was still in the outlet. She sighed out of frustration and got out of bed. She pulled the plug from the wall and wrapped the cord neatly on the vacuum. She then pushed the vacuum to the corner of her room, deciding that she would return it in the morning. She doubted that she could stomach the sight of Mandy again that night.

As she situated the vacuum in the corner, her eyes grazed her reflection in the mirror. For a second, she barely recognized the young woman who stared back at her. The once meticulously sculpted mascara now created dark, ominous shadows around her eyes, making her appear almost ghostly in the glass. Her almond brown eyes were usually bright, almost jovial, but they now sat behind the shadowy gloom, hidden and distant, their kindness concealed by the stress that had greeted them,

suggesting that beneath them was irrational emotion—anger waiting to unleash itself. Thin red welts swelled from her cheeks, likely the result of Jennifer’s irate fingernails scraping her skin, and although their presence should have suggested that she had been a victim, the blood stained scrapes instead made her appear almost vicious, intimating more a brutal branding than an injury. The honey brown of her face, normally smooth, seemed rough at the moment, her tightened, angry jaw only exacerbating the ferocious appearance. Fistfuls of permed hair protruded awkwardly from one side of her head, an unwanted complement to the now unkempt, loosened bun at the back of her head.

Had this threatening person who now stared back at Tamika been the young woman the security had seen and with whom they had spoken? Had she been the young woman with whom Jennifer had lived? If so, then perhaps Tamika could see how a misunderstanding could have brewed.

Unexpectedly, her reflection blurred, and before she could stop them, the tears fell, sliding slowly, then quickening, down her cheeks. Ashamed, Tamika covered her face with her hands and let herself sob, her shoulders shaking with each cry, at that moment wishing she were anywhere else but school.



Tamika sat in the lobby of Streamsdale University Student Center at 6:45 the next evening. Her Conduct Board hearing would begin in fifteen minutes. She had opted to attend the hearing without a Faculty Advisor, who would act somewhat like a lawyer for her. She would have laughed at the security officers’ suggestion, except they were serious. The entire hearing was a joke to Tamika, and the idea of a “lawyer” seemed ludicrous in light of the trivial altercation with her roommate. She had simply told the officers, “No, thank you,” when they offered her to submit a faculty member’s name, wondering who on earth could testify on her behalf. Besides, who had actually witnessed the incident?

Glancing at her watch, Tamika groaned. It was 6:59. She stood, and unexpectedly, her heart began to pound. *Why am I nervous?* she wondered as she opened the door to the room in which the case would be held.

The room was set up similar to a courtroom, except the university’s desks, tables, and chairs were being used for the effect. She smiled uneasily as she glanced across the room at the Conduct Board members, who were mostly students, seated at a long table facing her. There were two college professors on the board, and one was Dr. Sanders, her Religion 150 professor. Instinctively, she waved at him, momentarily forgetting where she was. Immediately, she was ashamed, realizing that

she had done the wrong thing, which was confirmed by the uncomfortable expression on Dr. Sanders's face after the friendly gesture. His eyes quickly glanced away from her, now looking at the pen and paper before him.

Tamika was directed to sit down in a chair in front of everyone, and the hearing began. A student introduced herself and read Tamika what she thought would be her rights. But instead, the student explained that Tamika was under Streamsdale University's Honor Code and would be held accountable for any false testimony. She went on to tell Tamika that the case could not be discussed with any member of the board outside the room and that Tamika was forbidden to approach any of them concerning the hearing.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked Tamika.

She had to ask Tamika twice before receiving a response, which was more a mumble and a shake of the head than it was a clear answer.

"You, Tamika Douglass, have been charged with the physical assault of Jennifer Mayer," she informed her. "How do you plead?"

Physical assault? How do I *plead*? This all had to be a joke. These students could not be serious.

"How do you plead, Miss Douglass?"

So they were serious. "Not guilty," she replied.

The student directed Tamika's roommate to sit in the desk that was about three feet from where Tamika sat. "Jennifer," she began, "tell the board exactly what happened last night."

Jennifer began uneasily, but minutes later, she articulately described the incident, recounting how she had tried to call her mother when Tamika violently punched her hand into the receiver. She further explained that after she asked Tamika why she had done it, Tamika shoved her into the bed, injuring her head. Afraid, Jennifer explained, she tried to fight back, but to no avail. That was when Mandy came in, thank God, before Tamika could hurt her any further. Mandy testified next and told the board what she had seen. She carried on dramatically, and Tamika was amazed at how Mandy's three minutes at the scene had turned into nearly thirty minutes of expressions, gestures, and reenactments.

Tamika stared at the table as Christina took the seat in front of the board, recounting what she had seen. She told them that she had left the room out of fear for her safety, afraid that Tamika would attack her. Next, the two residents who had fetched security testified, and they too recounted the "terrifying" scene. Tamika began to feel overwhelmed, now wishing she had opted to have a Faculty Advisor by her side, not so much for her defense but for comfort and support. However, she had no one, leaving her feeling isolated and alone as she was painted a villain. The room harbored an unfriendly atmosphere that she could not

break. She imagined that it would not matter what she said at that point, and she was certain that she had lost the case.

She stole a quick glance at Dr. Sanders, who listened intently to the witnesses. He had not even as much as looked at Tamika since she had unwittingly waved to him.

Tamika's stomach began to knot, and her head ached. She swallowed. She wanted nothing more than to just get up, leave, and never come back. But there was no escape. Her hands that were folded neatly in front of her began to shake. She quickly removed them from the table and onto her lap, where her palms began to sweat. The voices in the room were far away now, mere whispers in the background, and Tamika's mind drifted to her first day of second semester the year before, when she had first met Dr. Sanders.

After class, she had eagerly introduced herself to the first African-American professor she had had since enrolling as a freshman.

"Hi, Dr. Sanders," she greeted him that day. "I'm Tamika Douglass."

"Well, hello, Miss Douglass," he returned the friendly greeting with a smile. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, and you?"

"Just fine. And where are you from?"

"Milwaukee."

"Wisconsin?"

"Yes."

"That's quite a ways. I hear it's cold up there."

"It is, but it's beautiful in the summer."

"I hear that too," he replied, stacking papers and putting them into his black briefcase. "So what brings you to Georgia?"

"Streamdale."

"The university or the town?"

She shrugged. "Both, I suppose. But I guess the university more than the town." She paused then confessed, "They gave me the most money."

He laughed. "Well, that is important," he admitted. "I'm still paying off my student loans."

"Where are you from?"

"Tampa Bay."

"Florida?"

"Yes, I guess I was a Southern boy, as they say."

The conversation had been nice and easy-going, and he proved to be amicable, even as a professor, which was why Tamika enjoyed his class a lot. He also had a sense of humor that gave the class a relaxed atmosphere. She had never been one to study world religions, but after having Dr. Sanders for Religion 101, her interest was sparked in the subject. And she had actually begun considering declaring Religion her major, which was why she enrolled in the 150 course this year.

“Tamika?” the student who headed the Conduct Board repeated.

“Oh, um, yes?” Tamika had unintentionally shut out her surroundings.

The student blinked, and again inquired, “Do you have anything to add to the testimony?”

All eyes fell on Tamika. The student and faculty board members shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. Even Dr. Sanders stared at her now, anticipating a response. “Um, no,” she answered finally without thinking.

“No?” the student repeated, disbelieving. “Are you sure you’ve nothing to add?” She waited for a response. “This is your time to speak, Tamika,” she reminded, “without interruption.”

Tamika glanced nervously about the room. Everyone was waiting on her, focusing on her. How could she tell her side of the story when she had tuned out the majority of the other side? She wanted to argue her case, but for or against what would she argue? Without realizing it, she looked desperately to Dr. Sanders, pleading. He quickly looked away and began toying with his pen.

“What happened last night?” a student board member encouraged.

“Did you shove Jennifer into the bed, causing the head injury?” another asked.

“No,” Tamika managed to mumble loud enough for the board to hear. “I was defending myself,” she said louder.

“So are you saying Jennifer hit you first?”

“Yes,” she answered more assertively, lifting her head to face the questioner. “She came at me, trying to hit me, so I pushed her away.”

A million questions seemed to come to her at once, but amazingly, she managed to answer them all. When they had run out of questions, Tamika was allowed to leave.

“You can call Dean Floyd’s office in the morning for the Conduct Board’s decision. You are excused,” the student dismissed her.



Friday afternoon, the day after she attended her board hearing for the charge of “physical assault,” Tamika stood removing clothes from her closet, eyes watering from anger. She was angry with herself and the entire Conduct Board, particularly Dr. Sanders—angry with herself for not being more wise in building an irrefutable defense and angry with the board for being so unfair. How was it that she had been found guilty of such an outlandish charge due to some meaningless squabble with Jennifer? Wednesday had not been the first day they had argued, although it was the first time they had ever physically clashed. But still, Jennifer was the one who had attacked her, and Tamika was only defending herself, having done nothing other than pushed her room-

mate away from her and held Jennifer’s arms to prevent Jennifer from hurting her. How was it then that she had on her college conduct record the charge of “physical assault”? Assault! She had not assaulted anyone! Then why was she being punished by having to move out of the room—now Jennifer’s room—by Monday morning?

Her mother often told her of the injustice of the so-called “justice” system of America. But Tamika had not expected to deal with this in college, not in this manner anyhow. And Dr. Sanders. She would have never expected that she would lose any case with him on the board. But she had. How could he? Guilty? He knew her better than that. She was not the type of person to assault someone. But apparently, she had expected more of him than he would give. Perhaps he was afraid of losing his job if he stood up for her. How petty and inconsiderate.

She skipped her Religion 150 class that day, too upset to even look at Dr. Sanders, let alone listen to his voice for fifty minutes, constantly being reminded of the night before, when he had pretended as if he did not even know her. Besides, she did not feel like telling him again that she had not yet selected a topic for her religion paper, especially since she could not even think about a paper right now.

Tamika knew she should have turned in her topic two weeks ago when everyone else did, but she was too indecisive. Every subject seemed so boring to her. She had half a mind to just tell him Christianity would be her topic, but she knew he would not fall for that one, given that she was supposed to select a religion with which she was unfamiliar. Buddhism, she had considered, but she could not bring herself to conduct an extensive research on a religion that seemed to be made up primarily of meditating and the “inner self.” It reminded her too much of the karate movies she could not stand when she was younger, and she could not even feign interest, definitely not for twenty pages—minimum. The project was beginning to make her reconsider religion as a major. Perhaps she was not cut out for this after all. Maybe she should just drop the class. Maybe she should just drop out of school.

She was being irrational.

There was a knock at the door, and before Tamika could respond, the door opened.

“What’s up!”

It was Makisha, lively as usual.

Tamika forced a smile. “Nothin’ much.”

“Heard you beat up your roommate,” her best friend teased her, laughing and closing the door behind her. “Finally!” Makisha’s large, silver loop earrings moved as she threw up her hands playfully, causing the smell of her perfume to drift in Tamika’s direction with the motion.

Tamika chuckled. “Girl, you’re crazy.”

“But you gotta tell me everything.”

She wrinkled her forehead. "It ain't nothin' to tell."

"What are you doing?" Makisha asked suddenly, noticing the piles of clothes on her friend's bed.

"Moving."

"Moving?" she asked in surprise, her dark brown forehead creasing in confusion. "Why?"

Tamika shrugged. "I don't know. Ask the Conduct Board."

"What? They're making you move?"

She nodded, sighing.

"Girl, you betta fight that."

She forced laughter. "Yeah, right. They think I 'physically assaulted' that girl. How am I gonna fight anything?"

"Physically assaulted her?" Makisha repeated in disbelief, taken aback by the extremity of the charge. "You serious?"

Tamika nodded.

They were silent for a few seconds.

"You okay?" Makisha inquired, now concerned as she noticed the distant expression on her friend's face.

Tamika shrugged, feeling as if she was going to cry, but she stopped herself, ashamed. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"When do you have to move?"

"By Monday."

"By Monday! That's crazy."

"I know," she murmured, laying her last outfit from the closet on her bed, then opening her drawer.

"So you ain't goin' out tonight?"

Tamika shook her head. "But I don't feel like it anyway."

"Girl, you need to get out!"

She sighed. "I need to sleep. I've been up doing this most of the morning."

"You didn't go to your classes?" Makisha inquired, stunned, her tone reeking of disapproval.

Oh. Tamika had told on herself. "No, I didn't feel like it."

"Girl," Makisha warned, concerned for her friend, "you better watch it. Your grades might fall."

Tamika shrugged. "I know."

"You wanna go shopping with me?" Makisha offered with a grin, her maroon lipstick accenting the whiteness of her teeth, which seemed to glow each time she smiled.

Tamika shook her head. "I have too much to do."

Makisha sucked her teeth. "You're a party pooper, girl."

Tamika waved her hand at her. "Whatever."

Makisha started to open the door and turned to her friend, unconsciously tossing the thick synthetic braids that hung just below her

shoulders. “Well, I gotta go pick up some things, but I’m gonna try to come back to help you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Girl, you gonna need all the help you can get. You got boxes?”

“Not really.”

“Well, I’ll ask Dante to see if he can get some for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Girl, it ain’t no problem,” she told her with a wave of her hand, revealing the maroon polished nails that matched her lips. “But I probably can’t bring ‘em till Saturday or Sunday, ‘cause,” she nodded, smirking, “you know, I gotta go partyin’ tonight.” She moved her shoulders playfully imitating a dance move, and Tamika chuckled.

“Sorry I can’t join you.”

“Don’t worry,” she joked. “I’ll make you feel real bad, telling you all about it.”

Tamika smiled and nodded, at that moment noticing Makisha’s large sweatshirt and blue jeans, a casual outfit that somehow looked exceptionally good on her. “I’m sure you will.”

“Anyways, I’ll be seein’ ya!”

“Bye.”

“Bye!”

The door shut, and the room suddenly grew still. Tamika sat down on the edge of her bed and lowered her head. A moment later, she began to cry, which she found herself doing a lot lately. She felt as if everything was coming down on her at once. She doubted if she could take anymore. She was barely into the second semester of her sophomore year, and already, she was overwhelmed by the demands of college. She had not even declared a major yet, and if she went on like this, it was doubtful, at best, if she would graduate.

Tamika never wanted to go to college in the first place, desiring to pursue a career in the music industry as a recording artist, hoping to become a famous singer. But her mother thought she was crazy. Sometimes she wondered if she actually was, but that did not decrease her love for music. But, she had to admit, there were many who dreamed of being famous singers and never made it. So she decided that college was not such a bad idea after all. Besides, no one in her family had a college degree, and her mother thought her insane to turn down such a golden opportunity as higher education, especially to pursue an “impossible” career like singing. Her older sister had begun college but was unable to finish due to pregnancy, which was the same thing that prevented their mother from going to college in the first place.

Tamika had done well her first year in college, achieving a 3.4 grade point average, but this had been because she had thrown herself into her books, determined to make her mother happy, even if she herself

was not. But even then, she had good days and bad days, but she was grateful that the former occurred more often. However, her sophomore year had begun slowly, and her course load was heavy and demanding. She had been forced to take high level science and mathematics courses, which were required for graduation, and she was lost. She often spaced out in class, unable to focus on what her professors were saying, and she was too shy to ask questions for fear they would think she was stupid. She had already been made to feel like a fool the previous semester, having been shot down by one of her classmates for misunderstanding what the student felt was “basic information” for the chemistry course.

She hated to be another statistic, despising the idea of a minority student falling through the cracks. But at that moment, Tamika couldn't have cared less. She was tired of seeking to prove the world wrong on things they would believe no matter what she did. If she were to do bad, they would think it normal. If she were to do well, they would think she was an exception. It was exhausting trying to even keep up with what she had to prove. If she were not trying to prove that she was just as intelligent as the next person, she was trying to prove that she was not a sex object. If she were not trying to prove that she was just as capable of the job as the next person, she was trying to prove that she was unique. It was draining, all the battles she had to fight. At times she just felt like relaxing, forgetting about it all, but she could not. Her mother, other family, and friends were cheering her on, encouraging her to be the person they were unable to be—even if she did not want to be that person, and even if she was not cut out to be her.

And then there were the pressures of society, the necessity to find a job, get married one day, and buy a home and car. She did not feel like fighting the battles of the workplace, with its pervasive racism and sexism. For her, the workplace would be less a means to earn money than the grounds for yet more battles she was unequipped to fight. She had had a job all through high school, and it frustrated her how unfair everything was. She had watched White people pass her up after working only six months, while she was still in the same position after two years. They often became her manager although they were not even employed when she began working there. She would come home complaining to her mother, who would simply say, “That's just how it is.”

Her aunts and uncles felt she could be a senator one day, capable of changing everything. Her mother thought perhaps she could be a lawyer and fight for minorities' rights. But Tamika, who was barely driven to even vote, feeling it a futile gesture in truly changing anything—in that century anyway (if any others)—wanted nothing other than to go to the farthest corner of the room, away from everyone, and write a poem, which would turn into a song. Paper and pen were dearer to her than gold at those moments. The lyrics would come to her, and she would

frantically write, hoping the words did not escape her mind before the pen could catch them. Sometimes she would recite the poem or sing it to her family, and they always enjoyed it, showering her with praise for her talent. But they did not believe in her beyond that.

“You gotta get an education if you wanna be anything,” her mother would tell her.

But Tamika dreaded the idea of sitting in classrooms, taking tests, and stressing over grades for four years, after which she would have to spend several more years doing the same thing—only it would get worse in graduate school. She felt that her poetry and songs were as good as anybody’s, if not better, so why couldn’t she make it like others had? Her family just had no faith. She would prove them wrong. She would be famous one day. She knew it—even if they didn’t. But one day they would know—when she did make it. Perhaps they would find out after turning on the radio one day and thinking, gee, that voice sounds familiar.

*They say be strong,
But what if I’m weak?
They say stand up, speak out
But what if I’m meek?
They say fight hard
But what if I’ve no hands?
They say it makes sense
But what if I don’t understand?
They say be like this
But what if I’m like that?
They say hit hard
But what if I’ve no bat?
They say choose this
But what if I’ve no choice?
They say tell ‘em this
But what if I’ve no voice?*

The words had not escaped her mind before she was able to write them down, and for that, Tamika was grateful. It was short, she knew, but sometimes that was enough, especially for journal entries, which she wrote whenever she felt like it. This one had come to her that night before going to bed. And as usual, it calmed her to put her thoughts on paper, and she was finally able to sleep.



About the Author

Umm Zakiyyah is the bestselling author of more than twenty books, including the novels *If I Should Speak* trilogy, *Muslim Girl*, and *His Other Wife*; and the self-help books *Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You*, *Prejudice Bones in My Body*, and *The Abuse of Forgiveness*. Her novel *His Other Wife* is now a short film.

She writes about the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians and the intercultural, spiritual, and moral struggles of Muslims in America. Her work has earned praise from writers, professors, and filmmakers and has been translated into multiple languages.

Umm Zakiyyah recently founded UZ University, where she teaches online courses to aspiring and struggling writers at **uzuniversity.com**.

To find out more about the author, visit her website at **uzauthor.com** or connect with her online:

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Books By Umm Zakiyyah

Fiction

If I Should Speak (Book 1 in trilogy)

A Voice (Book 2 in trilogy)

Footsteps (Book 3 in trilogy)

Realities of Submission

Hearts We Lost

The Friendship Promise

Muslim Girl

His Other Wife

UZ Short Story Collection

The Test Paper (a children's book)

Non-Fiction

Pain. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah

*Broken yet Faithful. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah
(Adult Coloring Book)*

Faith. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah

*Let's Talk About Sex and Muslim Love: Essays on Intimacy
and Romantic Relationships in Islam*

*Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You: A Daughter of
Rape and Abuse Inspires Healing and Healthy Family*

*And Then I Gave Up: Essays About Faith and Spiritual
Crisis in Islam*

I Almost Left Islam: How I Reclaimed My Faith

*The Abuse of Forgiveness: Manipulation and Harm in the
Name of Emotional Healing*

even if.

souls.

*No One Taught Me the Human Side of Islam: The Muslim
Hippie's Story of Living with Bipolar Disorder*

*Prejudice Bones in My Body: Essays on Muslim Racism,
Bigotry and Spiritual Abuse*