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Prologue
A Single Pointing Finger

Medina, January 627
Fourteen years old

Scandal blew in on the errant wind when I rode into Medina clutching Safwan's waist. My neighbors rushed into the street like storm waters flooding a *wadi*. Children stood in clusters to point and gawk. Their mothers snatched them to their skirts and pretended to avert their eyes. Men spat in the dust and muttered, judging. My father's mouth trembled like a tear on the brink.

What they saw: my wrapper fallen to my shoulders, unheeded. Loose hair lashing my face. The wife of God's Prophet entwined around another man. What they couldn't see: my girlhood dreams shattered at my feet, trampled by a truth as hard and blunt as horses' hooves.

I let my eyelids fall shut, avoiding my reflection in the stares of my *umma*, my community. I licked my cracked lips, tasting salt and the tang of my wretchedness. Pain wrung my stomach like strong hands squeezing water from laundry, only I was already dry. My tongue lolled like a sun baked lizard. I rested my cheek against Safwan's shoulder, but the horse's trot struck bone against bone.

"*Al-zaniya!*" someone cried. "Adulteress!"

I made slits with my eyes. Members of our *umma* either pointed fingers and shouted at me or spread their arms in welcome. I saw others, Hypocrites, jeering and showing their dirty teeth. The *ansari*, our Helpers, stood silent and wary. Thousands lined the street, sucking in our dust with their sharp breaths. Staring as if I were a caravan glittering with treasure instead of a sunburned fourteen-year-old girl.

The horse stopped, but I continued -- over its flank, headfirst and into the arms of Muhammad. Into my husband's control once more and sighing with relief. Trying to forge my own destiny had nearly destroyed me, but his love held the power to heal. His thick beard cushioned my cheek, caressed me with sandalwood. *Miswak* unfurled from his breath, clean and sharp as a kiss.

“Thank al-Lah you have made it home safely, my A'isha,” he murmured.

The gathering crowd rumbled, prickling my spine. I lifted my heavy head to see. Umar, rolled in, thunder and scowl. He was Muhammad's advisor and friend, but no friend to women.

“Where, by al-Lah, have you been? Why were you alone with a man who is not your husband?”

His accusations whipped like the wind through the crowd, fanning sparks into flames.

“*Al-zaniya!*” someone cried again. I ducked as if the word were a hurled stone.

“It is no wonder that A'isha rhymes with *fahisha* -- whore!” People laughed, and soon they began to chant: “A'isha -- *fahisha!* A'isha -- *fahisha!*” Muhammad steered me through the crush toward the mosque entrance. As if in a mosaic their faces swirled before me: the jowly Hamal and his pale wife Fazia-turned-Jamila, screaming and plum-

colored; the town gossip, Umm Ayman, pursing her wrinkled lips; Abu Ramzi, the jeweler, flashing golden rings on his waving fists. I'd expected murmurs when I returned, and lifted eyebrows -- but this? People who had known me all my life now wanted to tear me apart. And Safwan -- I turned my head to look for him, but he had disappeared. As always.

Rude fingers yanked my hair. I cried out and slapped them away, and a stream of spittle landed on my arm. Muhammad set me on my feet and faced the mob, then raised his hands into the air. Silence fell like a shroud, muffling even the glares.

“A'isha needs to rest,” Muhammad said. His voice sounded as weary as I felt. “Please return to your homes.”

He curled his arm around me and we ducked into the mosque. My sister-wives stood near the courtyard entrance, two and two. Sawdah rushed forward, ululating, enfolding me in her plumpness. She praised al-Lah for my safe return, then kissed her amulet to ward off the Evil Eye. Next came Hafsa, weeping, kissing my hands and face. She whispered, “I thought you were lost forever.” I didn't tell her that she was nearly right. Umm Salama nodded, unsmiling, as if she feared her head might topple off her long stem of a neck. Zaynab slanted lusty eyes at Muhammad as though she and he were alone in the room.

But my husband's concerns were only for me. When my stomach clenched again, slumping me in pain, he caught me and lifted me up as though I were filled with air. And in truth, I had little else left inside me. I floated in his arms to my apartment. He kicked open the door and carried me inside, then placed me on my feet again while he unrolled

my bed. I leaned against the wall, grateful for the quiet -- until Umar's shout barged into the room, followed by the man himself.

"See how she shames al-Lah's holy Prophet!" he cried. "Gallop through the center of town with her hands on another man and her hair waving like a harlot's dress."

"A harlot with vomit-stinking breath and hair like a bird's nest?" I blurted. Even in my condition, I had to laugh.

"Please, Umar," said Muhammad. "Can you not see that she is ill?"

"You indulge her."

"I am happy to see her alive, praise al-Lah." The love in my husband's gaze made me blush. How close I'd come to betraying him with that trickster! Safwan had lured me with freedom, then tied my destiny to his desires. No different than any other man. Except, perhaps, Muhammad.

"*Yaa habibati*, what reward should I offer Safwan ibn al-Mu'attal for bringing you home safely to me?"

"One hundred lashes would be fitting," Umar grumbled.

"But Safwan saved her life."

"Apparently, Umar thinks I should have been left at the mercy of the jackals -- or the Bedouins," I said.

"At least you would die with your honor intact."

"Nothing has happened to A'isha's honor," Muhammad said.

"Tell that to Hassan ibn Thabit," Umar said. "I heard him moments ago reciting a damning poem about your wife and that womanizing soldier."

A poem. No wonder the *umma* had snapped at my heels like a pack of dogs when I'd ridden into town. Hassan's words could incite a crowd into frenzy nearly as quickly as Muhammad's raised hand could quell it.

But I refused to let Umar see me tremble. "Me, with Safwan? That's ridiculous," I said. "I'm the wife of al-Lah's holy Prophet. Would I want a nobody like him?"

I felt Muhammad's eyes watching me. Heat spread like flame under my skin. Had he heard the lie beneath my laughter?

Clipped steps rapped on the courtyard stones. A man's hand flung open the door to my apartment. His silver ring flashed like a sword's blade: Ali, related to Muhammad in three ways -- cousin, foster-son and son-in-law -- yet bitterly jealous of his love for me. Stabs of pain pierced my stomach. I leaned my head against Muhammad's shoulder.

"Here she is!" Ali extended his arm to point at me. "Medina churns with sickness over your ruin, A'isha. Men are fighting in the streets over your guilt or innocence. Our own people have turned against one another. The unity of the *umma* is threatened because of you."

"Did you defend me?" Even as I challenged him, I knew the answer.

He turned to Muhammad. "How can I defend her when Safwan himself will not speak on her behalf?"

Of course. Not only had Safwan disappeared when the crowd grew menacing, but when my father and Ali had approached him with questions, he'd hidden inside his parents' home. Some rescuer. I felt tears burn my eyes, but I willed them away. The only one who could save me, it seemed, was me.

“Safwan doesn’t need to defend me,” I said, although my voice quavered and I still leaned on Muhammad for support. “I can speak for myself.”

“Let her rest,” Muhammad said. He helped me walk to my bed, but before I could lie down Ali was insisting I tell my story. The *umma* could not wait to know the truth, he said. Another crowd was forming outside the mosque at this very moment, demanding answers.

I closed my eyes, recalling the tale I and Safwan had fashioned on the ride home, during my lucid moments. I was looking for my agate necklace, I said, fingering the smooth stones. “My father gave it to me on my wedding day. Remember?” I looked at Muhammad. “It means as much to me as the necklaces you’ve given your *other* wives.”

His expression didn’t change. I pressed on, spinning a tale that began with me slipping behind the sand dunes to relieve myself, then returning to my *howdah*. As I waited to be lifted onto the camel’s back I felt for my necklace -- but my throat was bare.

“I searched my clothing, the floorboards of my *howdah*, the ground. I would have asked the driver to help me, but he was watering the camels." My voice stumbled like tender feet on rocky ground. I took a ragged breath, trying to hold steady. "I followed my path back to the dunes. I sifted the sands with my fingers. Then, when I was about to give up, I found it. I ran back to the caravan -- but you were far away, like ants crawling single-file into tomorrow. I knew I could never catch you. So I sat down to wait for someone to come back for me.”

“Someone?” Ali pointed his sharp nose at me, sniffing for lies. “You mean Safwan.”

“*Yaa* Ali, let her tell her tale,” Muhammad said.

“In truth, it is a tale, and nothing more.” Ali spat on the dirt floor and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, glaring at me. “You waste our time with this fantasy, while we all know the real story.”

“Ali, please,” Muhammad said, more sternly. Ali folded his arms across his chest and curled his lips at me. My courage wavered under his scrutiny. Did he truly know the reason I had lost the caravan? Maybe it would be better for me to tell the truth -- but a glance at my husband’s concerned face changed my mind. Even Muhammad, who knew me as if our souls were one, wouldn’t understand why I’d risked so much for so little -- and he might not believe me when I told him I was still pure.

“You sat down to wait,” Umar said. “What occurs next in this unlikely tale?”

I closed my eyes, feeling faint. What was the story? I and Safwan had rehearsed it during our ride. I let out a long sigh, calming my frantic pulse. This next part was true.

“As the sun rose, I found shade under a grove of date-palm trees,” I said. “I lay down, keeping cool. Then I must have slept, because the next thing I remember is Safwan’s hand on my shoulder.”

Umar grunted. “Did you hear that, Prophet? Safwan ibn al-Mu’attal is now touching your wife. We all know where that leads.”

“Why didn’t you both ride home right away?” Ali barked.

“Something happened to me.” This part was also true. “I felt a sharp cramp, like a knife in my stomach.” Muhammad’s eyes seemed to soften -- a good sign, meaning he must believe me at least a little.

“I couldn’t travel, not while I was doubled over with pain. So Safwan pitched his tent for me to rest in, out of the sun.”

Ali guffawed. "And where was Safwan while you were lying in his tent?" I ignored him, wanting only to finish this interrogation and go to sleep.

"I retched for hours. Safwan tried to help me. He gave me water and fanned me with a date-palm frond. Finally he became frightened, and we came back for help." I didn't tell how he'd nearly made me scream with his hand-wringing. *Al-Lah is punishing us*, he'd moaned, over and over again. Along with the water, I began to spit up bile and remorse. *Take me to Medina*, I said sourly. *Before al-Lah kills us both*.

When I finished my tale, Ali was scowling. "This is not the full story," he said. "Why was Safwan lagging so far behind the caravan? Was it because he knew you would be waiting for him under the date palms?"

"I asked Safwan to remain behind," Muhammad said. "To watch for the return of the Mustaliq to their camp."

"She has been flirting with him for years!"

I snorted, as if his words amused me instead of chilling my blood. He spoke the truth -- but who else knew?

"Where is your proof, Ali?" I said, meeting his angry gaze for a moment, then dropping it for fear he'd see the panic in my eyes. "A single pointing finger makes an insignificant mark."

Then, with Muhammad's help, I lay down on my bed and turned my back to them all: the ever-suspicious Umar; Ali, so eager to think the worst of me; and my husband, who could quiet an angry mob with a raised hand but who had allowed these men to slander me. Why had I returned? I closed my eyes and dreamt, again, of escape. This time, though, I knew it was only a dream. There would be no escaping my fate. At best,

al-Lah willing, I might shape my destiny -- but I couldn't run from it. This much I had learned from my mistakes these past few days.

I slept lightly, tossed by fever and regret, until whispers whipped about my head like stinging sand, jolting me back to consciousness. Muhammad and Ali were sitting on the cushions near my bed, arguing -- about me.

"I cannot believe A'isha would do such a thing," Muhammad said. His voice was a broken shell, fragile and jagged. "I have loved her since she sprang from her mother's womb. I have played dolls with her and her friends. I have drunk from the same bowl with her."

"She is fourteen years old," Ali said, his voice rising. "Not a little girl anymore, although many years younger than you. Safwan is much closer to her age."

"Shh, Ali! Do not disturb A'isha's rest."

"Then let us find a more suitable place to talk." I heard the rustle of cloth. *Don't go*, I wanted to beg, but I was too weak. So I moaned, instead. Muhammad laid his hand on my forehead.

"Her skin is hot," he said. "I cannot leave her alone."

"Then I must speak here."

"Please, cousin. I value your counsel."

I held my breath, dreading Ali's next words. What kind of punishment would he suggest for me and Safwan? A whipping? Banishment from the *umma*? Death?

"Divorce her," Ali said.

“No!” I sat up, ready to throw my arms around my husband’s neck and hold on with all my strength. Muhammad stroked my damp brow, his smile shifting like a shadow under a changing sun.

“Don’t leave me,” I said, forgetting about Ali, the last person I would have wanted to hear me beg.

“I am not leaving you, *habibati*. But I have decided to send you to your parents’ house for a while. Abu Bakr and Umm Ruman will nurse you back to health, al-Lah willing, away from all these wagging tongues.”

“Don’t divorce me.” Weeks later, as I waited in my parents’ house for Muhammad’s verdict, I’d wince to recall how I’d clung to his hand and cried in front of Ali. “I love you, *habibi*.”

I meant those words as I’d never meant them before. I’d learned much during those hours in the desert with Safwan. Safwan, who’d promised one thing and delivered another, the same as when we were children.

“I love you, too, my sweet.” But his voice sounded far away, and his eyes looked troubled. I lay down and clutched his hand as though it were a doll, then drifted slowly back toward sleep.

As I slipped away again I heard Ali’s voice, urgent and low.

“Think of the *umma*, how delicate its weave,” he said. “A scandal like this could tear it apart. You must act now, cousin. Send her back to Abu Bakr for good.”

“Divorce my A’isha?” Muhammad’s laugh sounded nervous and faint. “I would just as soon cut out my own heart.”

“She’s tainted,” Ali said -- increasing my hatred for him with each word. “You need to distance yourself from her before this scandal marks you, also. Many men in this town would love to see you fall.”

Muhammad slowly pulled his hand from my grasp, leaving me to drift alone on my sea of fears.

“Can’t you see it?” Ali pressed. “I know you can. Then why do you look so worried? Wives are easily acquired. You will find another child-bride.”

Centuries later, scandal still haunts my name. But those who scorned me, who called me “al-zaniya” and “fahisha,” they didn’t know me. They never knew the truth -- about me, about Muhammad, about how I saved his life and he saved mine. About how I saved all their lives. If they knew, would they have mocked me then?

Of course, they know now. Where we are now, all truth is known. But it still eludes your world. Where you are, men still want to hide the women away. You, in the now, they cover with shrouds or with lies about being inferior. We, in the past, they erase from their stories of Muhammad, or alter with false tales that burn our ears and the backs of our eyes. Where you are, mothers chastise their daughters with a single name. “You A’isha!” they cry, and the girls turn away in shame. We cannot escape our destinies, even in death. But we can claim them, and give them shape.

The girls turn away because they don’t know the truth: That Muhammad wanted to give us freedom, but that the other men took it away. That none of us is ever alive until we can shape our own destinies. Until we can choose.

So many misunderstandings. Here where we are, we cup the truth in our hands like water, trying to contain it, watching it slip away. Truth is too slippery to hold. It must be passed on, or it slides like rain into the earth, to disappear.

Before it disappears, I will pass my story on to you. My truth. My struggle. And then, who knows what will happen? Al-lah willing, my name will regain its meaning. No longer, then, a word synonymous with treachery and shame. Al-Lah willing, when my story is known, my name will evoke once more that most precious of possessions. Which I claimed for myself and for which I fought until, at last, I won it from the Prophet of God - not only for myself, but for all my sisters also.

My name: "A'isha." Its meaning: "life." May it be so again, and forevermore.