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Book Excerpt:

Chapter 1

An Abortion of Faith

Ronald had been in and out of juvenile detention centers and jail since he was fourteen. The last time he was in, charged with attempted robbery and attempted murder, he converted to Islam and changed his name to Dawud. Of course I didn't know the extent of his lawlessness, not did I know about the twenty-years-to-life sentence hovering over him when I embraced him.

Ronald considered himself my life coach or street teacher in some ways. Yes, he was my first sex partner. His stepfather told him I looked like an uptight little girl and he needed to turn me out. He did that promptly, and I made him marry me shortly after by guilt-tripping him. That wasn't hard to do. He had been in and out of prison already, in and out of court. It's not hard to manipulate the guilt of a man who already feels guilty.

I felt guilty, too, for having sex outside the honored institution of marriage. I knew I wasn't going to stop sneaking around to be with him, screwing him in his mother's car or in their basement because after I got used to it, it got kinda good. I insisted we get married to make the sex legal.

Funny how the guilt from the back of your mind springs forth into actions to punish you and whoever is involved. Ronald didn't even have a job when I insisted we get married. Sure, I knew he felt bad about not having a job, not having money to buy me

things. I knew because he got teary-eyed up and ended up yelling at me when I complained about the cheap card and plastic rose he brought me for our first Valentine's Day. That was the February before we got married in May. We were sitting in the back of his mother's car, him presenting his cheap-ass present to me, and I couldn't hide my disgust.

"This is all?" I said. No yelling or screaming on my part, but my words seemed to cut into him just the same.

"You think I don't want to be able to get you something nice?"

He shoved the back of the car seat, snarled at me, and moved away.

"What ya'll back there fussing about?" his mother said, looking up in her rear view mirror. "Ya'll always fussing, like two old married people. Ya'll might as well go on and get married the way ya'll act."

All I can say is stupid mothers have stupid children – and stupid children-in-law. Stupid.

"I'm just saying, you knew Valentine's Day was coming up. You could've saved up for something," I said, still feeling mousy-like, not realizing the bite in my soft-spoken words.

We rode the rest of the way home in silence and when his mother pulled into her parking space in the lot between our houses and I hopped out and headed for my door.

"Ray-Ray. You just gon' leave?" he said.

"Yeah. I'm tired," I said. What I meant was, your ass is tired.

"You're not even gon' take your card?"

"Oh. I forgot."

His mother shook her head.

“Ya’ll gon’ end up married,” she said.

“Sonsyrea! You need to get in here in a hurry,” my mother yelled from where she was standing at the back door.

I figured I was in for lecture number 999 because she had already complained about me spending too much time with that young man next door and what was I doing in his mother’s car and if he wanted to make proper intentions on me then he needed to have a talk with my father. I was in no mood for Ma’s fantasy world right about now.

“I’m coming,” I yelled back to her. “I’ll get my folder from you tomorrow,” I said to Ronald, loud enough for him to know I was speaking for my mother’s ears and so he wouldn’t hand me his Valentine’s gift, which I would have to explain.

The next time his mother picked both of us up from school, she asked me why I was keeping our relationship a secret from my mother.

“If you’re ashamed of my son, then he needs to find somebody else to be with,” she said. “My son is a good man, and he’s gon’ take real good care of you one day.”

“I’m not supposed to have a boyfriend. So, I can’t tell my mother,” I explained, slumping in the backseat, Ronald sitting up front.

“What you mean you can’t have a boyfriend? Shit. Ain’t this ‘bout your second or third year in college? I heard of being strict, but goddamn. They gotta let you grow up at some time,” she said.

“Ma, she don’t need to hear all that. She don’t like talking about it,” Ronald said.

“Well shit, ya’ll better do something. What you think, you just gon’ keep sneaking around? You know they say whatever is done in the dark gon’ come out in the light.”

That’s what I liked about Ms. Bates. She was real. She knew I was sexually active and wasn’t nothing wrong with it. I was just a girl growing into my womanhood.

“That’s that Mooslem stuff, ain’t it?” she continued. “That’s why I couldn’t be no Mooslem. I mean, some of that stuff is all right, but people got to be who they are. What you ‘posed to do, stay a virgin all your life?”

“Until you’re married,” I mumbled.

“Well, god damn. What if ya’ll ain’t ready to get married? My son don’t need to be trying to get married right now. Let him finish school and get a job. Shit. You ain’t but, what? How old are you, Ray-Ray?”

“Eighteen.”

“Well, shit, you too young to be thinking ‘bout getting married.”

She just went on and on and most of what she said danced around my head without me even hearing it. Her daughters were unwed teenage mothers. So much for her logic. But she sort of made sense in a way. Why should I get married just to have sex when neither one of us really could afford to live up to the roles of husband and wife. Neither one of us could take care of a baby if we had one. My Muslim community insisted young people get married to avoid the sin of sex. Just get married and Allah would make a way. Birth control also was prohibited. So, just get married to avoid the hell fire your raging hormones could cause, and go on and have the babies, having faith that Allah would provide.

None of this shit made any sense, but guilt is a powerful motivator. Guilt and sex together can lead you right into a hell of your own making.

“We’re going to have to get married because I ain’t goin’ to hell for you or nobody,” I told Ronald one afternoon when we were riding the bus home from campus together.

“That’s what you really want to do?” he said. “You know I can’t even buy you a ring right now.”

“I think we should. Just do it so we won’t be sinnin’. If it doesn’t work out, we can always get a divorce.”

“So, you want to tell your moms and pops we getting’ married?”

“Yeah. I guess I better figure out the best way, though. I don’t want to go through all that stuff my mother wants to do, bringing the families together and all that La-La Land stuff.”

It was a Friday, so I decided to call my grandparents and tell them I was spending the night at my parents’ house so they wouldn’t expect me home at a decent hour. I told my mother I was spending the night at my girlfriend’s. Instead, I crept around to Ronald’s house and tapped on the back door to his basement and we made serious love – until we were rudely interrupted.

“Ronald, Ma said....Oh! Aw! Ray-Ray?!”

We had started dancing and ended up grinding against the wall until my blouse was up and his panties were down and, whoa, we were making serious love against the wall when his sister rudely interrupted us. I ran to hide under the covers on his bed.

“Won’t you knock!” Ronald yelled. “Didn’t you see my door closed?!”

“Ma told me to come ask you if you was getting up to wash her car in the morning.”

“Tell Ma I’ll be up there in a little while.”

I knew it was only a matter of time before his big-mouth sister began spreading my business around the neighborhood. Innocent little Ray-Ray wasn’t so innocent after all and she had seen me screwing her brother with her own eyes. Weeks passed and the wild girls from down the street rolled their eyes at me like, “I know she can’t do him like I could.”

April came and I ended up with a secret only two of my friends would know, a secret Ronald’s mother suspected.

“Ray-Ray, you pregnant?” she blurted out one evening when I was sitting on her porch talking to Ronald. “My son’s been sleeping a lot. I told him he must’ve gotten you pregnant. You know men get symptoms, too,” she said.

“Ma, she would know if she was pregnant. You don’t have to be asking her that,” he said.

“No, I ain’t pregnant,” I said.

“You been sleeping a lot?” he asked.

“No.”

I think that was the first lie between us. I had been very tired. Come to think of it, my period was late. When I got home, I checked the small calendar I kept in my drawer with my period days marked. I had not been on since the last part of February and it was now April 5. I didn’t even feel like I was about to come on, but my breasts felt a little tender to the touch.

That weekend I would buy a home pregnancy test from People's Drug store, and that Monday morning I would call a clinic from a phone booth at school and make an appointment to take an official pregnancy test and get an abortion if necessary. I was thinking fast now.

I didn't feel like seeing Ronald this Friday evening, so I went straight home to my grandparents after class. I ate the baked chicken, mashed potatoes and green beans left for me on the stove then headed straight up to my room to hibernate for the rest of the evening. I kept looking in the mirror. I couldn't help it. My face looked the same. I sat on the edge of my bed facing the mirror, just looking at my face. Then the phone rang.

"Did you come on your period yet?" Shawn asked. She was the only one I'd told.

"No," I said. "Not even a spot."

"What are you gon' do?"

"If I'm pregnant, I won't be for long," I said. "My appointment is week after next."

"You would get an abortion?" she asked, shocked.

"I can't stay pregnant," I said.

She offered to go with me, but I told her I wanted to go alone and not make it a big deal. In my mind, I would keep it a small detail. I slipped up and got pregnant, okay. It didn't have to be the end of the world. I'd slipped up several times and had sex with this guy. Were they really slip-ups though? I'd thought he was "taking me," but I kept going back for more, so I must've wanted it. It was all so confusing, the guilt, the pleasure, the shame, and the pleasure. So confusing. No way was I going to bring a baby into this kind of madness.

“You really shouldn’t go through that alone, Ray-Ray,” Shawn said sympathetically. “That’s what friends are for. You don’t think Ronald will go with you since you don’t want me to go?”

“I’m not telling him,” I said. “This is my body, my life. I’m just gon’ do what I need to do.”

“What time is the appointment? I can meet you there and make sure you get a cab afterwards.”

“Really. It’s no big deal. They said the procedure only takes about ten minutes. You rest for about fifteen minutes, then they send you home. I’m sure I can call a cab from there,” I said.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” she said.

“I’ll be all right,” I assured her. “Let me call you later. I’m sleepy.”

When I hung up the phone I stood and turned sideways in the mirror, smoothing my blouse down over my stomach.

“If I’m pregnant now, I won’t be next week,” I thought. The home test said positive, but I wanted the doctors to say for sure.

I was glad I had money in the bank thanks to Uncle Hussein, who had told me to put away a little something every time I got paid. I had enough for the abortion if needed. The next week couldn’t pass quickly enough, but before I knew it, I was at the clinic. Stupid people out front carried signs against abortions. Signs showing a dead baby in a jar or a mother pointing a gun at her pregnant womb. Stupid people. They were fools, all of them. Crazy, religious nuts blowing stuff way out of proportion.

I was shocked to find the waiting room full and a whole list of women signed up on a list to get the procedure. When I was called the first time I had to step into the bathroom and pee in a jar. When I was called the second time I had to step into another room and talk to a counselor. Yes, I knew what I was doing. No, I didn't need anyone's support. No, I wouldn't be burdened with guilt. I didn't care what the father thought. No, I wouldn't need follow-up therapy. Can we just get this little thing over with? The third time my name was called I went into a room where I was handed a white plastic robe to put on after taking off my clothes and showed what gurney to take. Less than thirty minutes later I was done, handed a small cup of apple juice to replenish my blood sugar, and freed to leave.

I didn't feel any different, except I was relieved that I wasn't pregnant anymore. I decided I could catch a cab at the curb rather than call one and have to wait twenty minutes or so for it to get there. I didn't pay no never mind to the idiots outside the clinic still carrying the signs. When I got home, I was glad my grandparents weren't there so I could slip up to my room and hibernate for the rest of the day. I just wanted to sleep. I was glad it was over. I was exhausted from having worried two whole weeks. I crawled under my sheets.

When the phone rang later that day it was Shawn again.

“Did you go?”

“Yep.”

“Well?”

“I was pregnant. But I'm not anymore.”

“So, how do you feel?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I heard...”

“I’m fine. I’m just glad I caught it in time. They said if I had waited any longer it would’ve cost a lot more to terminate.”

When I hung up the phone and lay alone with my thoughts, I was glad that I had not interrupted my own life, which I was trying to improve through study and career planning, but even more glad that I had not brought another life into this madness. What could I teach a little person? That the world is all fucked up and then you die, like Uncle Hussein? He had been the most righteous person I knew but look how he died. I couldn’t teach a little person that you do well and live well, that you follow this religion or that religion and you’ll be okay. The world was a very fucked-up place, a place I hated and did not understand. No way would I bring somebody else into it.

Abortion was a sin, they say, but I figured the real abortion in my life had occurred long before I slid up on that gurney to let the doctor snatch a fetus out of my womb. The real abortion had occurred when my fledgling faith in a big god with a capitol G had been snatched from my soul several years before I arrived at the clinic.

It was nobody’s fault, per se. Things just happen. You can say my first abortion happened when I was nine and I learned that my Savior, Elijah Muhammad, was dead. I had believed in him, his religion, and his world and it was snatched right out from my heart. Nobody did it, but it was done. No grown-up said, “Let me reach down and shake this child’s faith for the next thirty years.” Nobody thought that a child so young thought that much about the religion unfolding around her. Nobody noticed a little soul gasping for air, gasping for faith. What do I believe in now? All that stuff we learned was false?

Our prophet was false? We had been worshipping a false God? What the hell did that mean, and what do I do now?

The people around me had been too busy to notice that a little girl still showing up to school every day with homework complete had actually died in some way. Where did my God go? And how could he just up and die like that, leaving my world to fall apart?

Then it happened again. My other saviors died, my personal, real-life ones. Daddy got arrested and Uncle Hussein was dying from multiple sclerosis, his body shriveling and shaking beyond his control. My gods had died – been murdered by fate – long before I stretched my body out on a gurney and sacrificed my own flesh and blood.

My parents' Islam and my grandparents' Christianity prohibited abortion, but I didn't believe in their Islam or their Christianity all that much anymore. Neither had saved my uncle from dying a wretched death from multiple sclerosis, and neither had saved my father from getting arrested and whisked away to jail. I felt overwhelmed with too much religion, too many rules, many of which contradicted each other, if you asked me. Jesus said love everybody, but Christians couldn't see clear to loving their own Muslim family. The Quran said honor and obey your parents, but I guess that didn't apply to grown children who threw their parents' Christianity back at them like a dirty rag. It was all too much. Madness.

With the abortion, I was giving myself a new life. And I decided somewhere around that time that my career would be my new religion. Journalism. That was practical. I could follow the rules of reporting and writing and meeting deadlines and see the result in print the next day. That made sense to me.

I didn't feel guilty about aborting a life because I figured God gives women miscarriages often enough and taking it upon myself to end a pregnancy was no different from allowing stress or something else to cause a natural termination. I'd known about my mother's sister-friends' miscarriages, and my mother gave birth to a set of twins born dead. That all seemed so unnatural and out of order at first. Babies aren't supposed to die in the womb or be born dead. So what if I'd made a decision to terminate a pregnancy on my own.

I felt more powerful after the abortion. I had saved a little person from a messed-up life. It would take almost twenty years for me to learn that although I had terminated a pregnancy, I had not ended a life. Twenty years later, my nephews and nieces struggled with the very same chaos and confusion I'd hoped to spare the next generation. The offspring of my generation's spirits – the good and bad in us - would be born anyway. That's when I realized I was not God and could not give life or take it except according to some divine order beyond my control. In the meantime, for now, I enjoyed a sense of power that comes naturally at nineteen-years-old.

I felt like with the abortion, I had given new life and a stronger purpose to my career. I had decided to shape my life the way I thought it should go, not according to my mother's Muslim plans for me to marry and become a wife and mother to another houseful of kids, and not according to my grandparents' Christian values of maintaining the status quo of a marriage, two kids, a house, a dog, and a car.

I felt powerful mostly, but doubt would creep up on me from time to time. Did I do the right thing? Am I supposed to get married and have kids? I was confused, so I took the birth control pills religiously to avoid another pregnancy, then, since I wanted to

continue seeing Ronald and having sex, I decided to do what might be the right thing. If it didn't work out we could change it.

I didn't tell him about the abortion or the pills. This was still my business. My secret. My life. I was thinking of marrying him to make sex legal not because I had any fantasies about us being together happily ever after. I wasn't thinking that far down the road. I loved him now, and needed him now, that's all.

Over the next twenty years, I would think about the abortion from time to time, like when I was a reporter covering abortion marches or anti-abortion marches, and when I was thirty-five and realizing maybe I was never going to get married again or have kids. But I looked back and thanked God that I had the opportunity to choose a different life for myself. I lived in a country where I did not have to maintain traditions and an ancient – if dubious – morality. By the time I was thirty-five, I realized I had helped raise some of my younger siblings from the time they were born and maybe Ma had those babies for me. I had been a surrogate mother to them and maybe that was enough mothering for me.