

Endorsements

“People of the Book humbled me as I was reminded of my responsibility as a Christian to preach Christ more boldly. The smells, sights, and sounds of life in Saudi Arabia came alive again as Kathi Macias transported me back to the world I once knew, one in which I spent so many years of my life. Not only does Kathi do an extraordinary job in bringing the characters to life, but *People of the Book* shows the touch of a loving Savior to a lost world and illustrates the true meaning of what it means to pick up your cross and follow Christ. A must-read for every serious Christian.” —**Dolly Dahdal**, a former Saudi citizen

“A strong and moving story! All choices have consequences, some more life-affecting than others. *People of the Book* examines the cost of life-altering choices, both good and bad.” —**Gayle Roper**, author of *A Rose Revealed* and *Shadows on the Sand*

“People of the Book will rock your world. Macias demonstrates the reality of Christian persecution present in the Muslim world with an action-packed story and real-world characters. You’ll find yourself praying for the safety of the heroines (former Muslims who accept Jesus Christ) as their Lord and Savior. Buy a copy for you, your church library, and your missions-minded friends.” —**Jan Coates**, author of *Set Free* and *Attitude-inize*

“Through this ‘Extreme Devotion’ series, Kathi has shown her extraordinary gift of telling a compelling story that comes alive in the hearts and minds of the readers. I also felt compassion for the extreme situations these characters found themselves in. In *People of the Book*, Kathi shows God’s word is alive and well. It has the power to transform lives in incredible ways. The reader sees that God can do far more than we can ever imagine! Thank you, Kathi, for reminding me to pray for a culture and a people I don’t often think about. I felt concern for the young women in this novel as they struggled with their faith, hope, and fear as they could be killed for taking a stand for Christ. Kathi Macias once again has skillfully penned a thought-provoking, believable, captivating missions-minded novel. One I can’t stop thinking about and highly recommend!” —**Nora St. Laurent**, ACFW Book Club coordinator, the Book Club Network

“I finished this book days ago and can’t get the characters out of my head or heart. Kathi has done an amazing job bringing this subject to life with sensitivity and grace. Reading this story will change you.”—**Laurie Alice Eakes**, award-winning author of *Lady in the Mist*

“Certain stories need to be told. This is one of them. *People of the Book* by Kathi Macias is an intricately plotted narrative of a young Muslim woman’s insatiable hunger for a touch from Allah during Ramadan. The touch comes, but not in the manner she expects. The experience radically changes her life and her newfound Christian faith marks her as a traitor of Islam. Through Kathi’s extraordinary writing, we see God reaching the human heart. The author’s writing is savvy and places the reader into the heroine’s mind, emotions, and skin. I forgot I was holding a book, as the pages melted away, transporting me into the story, where I remained to the last word on the last page.—**Robin Jansen Shope**, author of the book and movie, *The Christmas Edition: Journey to Paradise*

“Be forewarned. Somewhere between the first word and the last, you may forget to breathe. But you will always remember this story, appropriate for our time. I promise.”—**Eva Marie Everson**, author of *Chasing Sunsets*

“Young women developing a friendship through an online chat room shouldn’t be trouble—unless one or more of them is from Saudi Arabia and the topic of discussion is Isa Masih—Jesus Christ. *People of the Book* is a tale of searching and finding, of love, courage, and sacrifice. And if the inevitable clash of a young girl’s faith and Muslim family honor is painted with deadly and heartwrenching realism, interwoven throughout is the comforting reminder that cradling the smallest falling sparrow are the everlasting arms of a loving heavenly Father. A story that will challenge hearts and minds.”—**Jeanette Windle**, author of *Veiled Freedom* and *Freedom’s Stand*

People of *the Book*

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the “Extreme Devotion” series

Kathi Macias

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Dedication

To the “people of the Book”: May we never forget the privilege
and responsibility of being identified as such;

To those who have not yet joined us as “people of the Book”:
We humbly invite you to do so.

To the One whose heart for all mankind is revealed in the Book:
Thank You for Your priceless gift.

To my husband, Al, and our children/grandchildren: May we be
joined through all eternity as grateful “people of the Book” —
whatever the cost.



Prologue

FARAH MOHAMMED AL OTAIBI LAY BRUISED AND BLOODY ON THE floor beside her bed. The image of her soft mattress floated in and out of her consciousness, as did the rank smells of urine and feces and blood. But she had no strength to drag herself from her current position. Even the slightest movement brought stabs of excruciating pain, so she tried to remember to keep her breathing shallow and her body still.

How long had she been here? Hours, certainly. Days? She couldn't be sure. Her father and brother had covered the windows with heavy, dark cloth, blocking out any light that might help her keep track of time.

Hunger wasn't an issue, for who could think of food when the pain was so intense? But thirst? Oh, how she longed for just a sip of cool water! Surely her mother would sneak in soon and bring her some. She had always taken care of her before—

Before...

The memory was back, though she tried desperately to block it out. Impossible. She could never forget that moment in time, for it was the dividing line between the before and after of her life. Before the tragedy that led to her brother's discovery. Before her father had flown into a rage over what he considered his daughter's betrayal and treachery. Before they had threatened to kill her in order to preserve the family's honor. Before her mother had tried to intervene.

Hot tears pricked the back of Farah's eyelids, as the vision of her mother's face before—and after—swam in front of her eyes. The pain in her heart at that moment far exceeded anything she felt in her body. Then suddenly, inexplicably, the meaning of her name—Farah, joy and cheerfulness—burst into her consciousness. Despite her agony and sorrow, Farah was unable to hold back the brief burst of laughter that exploded from her aching chest. How absurd that her parents had given her a name that implied happiness, and yet she now wondered if she had ever truly understood or experienced any of it in her not quite nineteen years of life.

But then she had met Isa, and everything—both good and bad—had changed forever.

Unlike the other two females in the household, she did not worship him or hang on his every word.

Chapter 1



THE DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN THE BEFORE AND AFTER OF FARAH'S life had actually been drawn earlier than she realized, during Ramadan, the eighteenth such observance of the holy month during Farah's brief lifetime.

For as long as Farah Mohammed Al Otaibi could remember, she had been fascinated with this most revered of Muslim holy days. Though women in the Saudi Kingdom didn't observe Ramadan in quite the same way or to the extent that the men did, Farah took every opportunity during that time to fast and pray, to read the Quran, to perform acts of charity and kindness to others, and to draw closer to Allah and to the one true faith, Islam—even if she had to do most of it in the privacy of her room, rather than at the mosque with her father and brother. At the same time, she had to admit that her father had shown great deference to her in allowing her to practice her faith beyond the point of most Muslim women. Farah suspected that her pursuit of religion was the only reason her parents hadn't insisted on arranging a marriage for her by this time.

Each year, as the month of Ramadan drew near, Farah's anticipation level rose. Though she dared not voice her longing except in prayer, she hoped each year that this would be the time Allah would answer her petitions and make Himself real to her. She knew Allah was merciful. Why then should she not hope that He would extend his mercy to her, despite the fact that she was a female?

Perhaps it hadn't happened to her before because she had been so late in becoming a woman, far beyond the normal age for any girls she knew. As a result, she had only recently veiled. Now, shielded from prying, lustful eyes each time she left her home, she maintained her purity with honor, choosing to wear the most concealing *abaya* possible, as well as black gloves and stockings so that even the smallest portion of her skin would not be visible. Even the soaring temperatures of the desert summer hadn't deterred her, though she opted to wear abayas made of cool silk during the year's hottest season rather than one of the heavier materials more common to the winter months. She personally could not imagine why some women complained at the need to cover themselves in public. It was, after all, what the beloved Prophet Muhammad had commanded so that faithful Muslim women might remain chaste and virtuous. And wasn't that much more important than wearing something only slightly more comfortable?

Ease and comfort were not Farah's primary concerns. The stories of the great Prophet and his faithful followers were her passion, and she pursued her religion with a fervor seldom seen in Saudi women, including Farah's younger sister, Nadia, and their mother, Sultana. As a result, Farah was her father's favorite—next to his only son, of course. Kareem was the firstborn, just a year older than Farah; he was also a male. That in itself was enough; he would always be the preferred child. But Farah's devout and submissive spirit had earned her a place in her father's heart as well, though he was restrained in his affections and compliments toward her. She understood without question that should she ever disobey or shame her family in any way, she would lose that favored spot and would be severely punished. But why should that concern her? She had no intention of ever

being anything but the most dutiful daughter—and some day soon, a dutiful wife.

For now, as she observed her first Ramadan as a woman rather than a child, she concentrated on her prayers, ignoring the growling of her stomach as she fasted according to the requirements of the holy month. Who knew what Allah might choose to do on her behalf before the month was over? The possibilities transformed Farah's gnawing hunger pangs to butterflies of anticipation. Surely this would be the year when she would draw closer to Allah and her life would change, once and for all!



Kareem knew that second only to his father, he was ruler in their home. His wants and desires would be met at the cost of his mother or sisters, and his word was considered law, so long as it did not contradict the teachings of Islam, the strict traditions of the Saudi Kingdom, or his father's wishes.

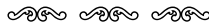
Kareem knew too that though the family wasn't wealthy, they were financially comfortable enough that he would have no problem obtaining the wife—or wives—of his choice when it came time to marry. He was also well aware that his tall, muscular stature and chiseled features created quite a stir among the eligible young women of Riyadh, and that they would welcome the possibility of becoming his bride, though in reality they would have little say in the matter. The mothers of the prospective couple would be instrumental in the matchmaking, but it would be the men in the families who would agree to and finalize the betrothals; brides were simply the chattel that completed the agreements.

But none of that was enough for Kareem. Though his father gave him the respect and honor due the firstborn and only son, and his mother nearly worshipped him, as did his youngest sister, it galled Kareem that his other sister, Farah, seemed content only to love and respect him. Unlike the other two females in the household, she did not worship him or hang on his every word. It was apparent to Kareem from an early age that Farah was much more devout in her religious beliefs and devotion to Allah than

most females, reserving her worship for Allah. Though Kareem believed, as did all good Muslim men, that their women should be faithful and chaste, he also felt that too much devotion to religion would prevent women from serving men as they were so obviously created to do.

For that reason, he hated Farah, though she had never done anything but be kind to him. He also hated her because she had managed to earn a place in their father's affections. Kareem knew it was lower than the place he owned, but it was higher than a woman deserved—higher even than Kareem's mother or youngest sister. Therefore it was unnatural, and it bothered Kareem nearly to the point of obsession.

Even now, as he knelt on his prayer rug, his face to the ground, reciting his praise and petitions by rote, his mind was not on Allah or anything associated with the observance of Ramadan. It was focused on Farah, who no doubt at this very moment was herself kneeling in prayer in the solitude of her room. The darkness of his thoughts blocked out all else.



Ramadan. The very word sent a shiver of excitement down Farah's spine, even as she knelt and listened...for what? She had no idea. *Will Allah speak to me? If so, how? Will I recognize His voice? Understand His words?*

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut to block out all distractions. The very thought of hearing from Allah was overwhelming. Better to concentrate on the meaning of the holy month that was now well underway.

It had been an especially hot day throughout the sprawling capital city of Saudi Arabia, with temperatures far exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit. But that was no surprise. Ramadan occurred during the hottest season of the year, and the very meaning of the word denoted intense heat and scorched ground. The residents of this part of the world expected nothing less, and the teeming millions who called Riyadh home were no exception.

Like the rest of her family, Farah had risen long before daylight so she would have time to eat *Suboor* before the call to first

prayer sounded from the minarets and the day's fast officially began. Even the lightweight material of Farah's *abaya* made breathing an effort, and sweat poured from her body as the blazing sun bore down from a merciless sky each time she stepped outside the confines of air-conditioned comfort. But Farah bore the difficulties without complaint, listening and waiting for the answer to her prayers. She hoped it would come before the end of the fourth prayertime, *Maghrib*, and the breaking of the day's fast with dates and coffee prior to a complete meal known as *Iftar*. But if no answer came by the setting of the sun, she would not grow impatient. After all, the month was only slightly half over. Who knew what Allah might grant to her before Ramadan's end at *Eid ul-Fitr*? And if she had no answer by then, she would continue fasting and praying throughout the six additional days of *as-Sitta al-Bid*. Surely Allah would honor her extra effort and reward her with a special blessing.

*She smiled and prayed as her fingers
flew across the keyboard,
an open Bible at her side.*

Chapter 2



SARA COULDN'T SLEEP. SUMMER HAD EXPLODED ON RIVER Crest's unsuspecting residents, and the temperature hadn't cooled off much during the night. Grateful that the Pacific Northwest summers were relatively short and normally quite mild, Sara was nonetheless uncomfortable and restless, as she tossed and turned, cooled only by the oscillating fan at the foot of her bed.

At least if we lived where the weather was warmer most of the time, we'd have air conditioning, she thought. But all we have are these fans to keep the hot air moving.

She sighed. Should she stay in bed and hope to drift off soon, or give up and see if she had any interesting email?

Smiling at the no-brainer question, she rolled out of bed and slipped her feet into her slippers before she thought better of it and slid them off again. Right now even slippers were too confining, and the coolness of the hardwood floors was a welcome relief.

Sara crossed the room and flipped the switch on her desk lamp before sitting down and booting up her computer. In

moments she was scrolling down the inbox list, eliminating the majority of impersonal notes as she went. Disappointed to find nothing worth pursuing, she decided to visit the chat room she'd frequented lately—the one where Christian believers of Muslim backgrounds tended to gather, as well as Muslims seeking to connect with these non-practicing Muslims for various reasons.

She was pleased to find several people already online and discussing the importance of Ramadan, since the annual holiday had just begun. Though Sara had never lived in a Muslim country and no one in her immediate family was a practicing Muslim, her parents had taught her about the faith of her ancestors and relatives. As a result, she felt drawn to use her knowledge of Islam to connect with Muslims who might be open to hearing the true gospel.

Sara greeted the others in the chat room and was quickly acknowledged by Nura, a young woman in Saudi Arabia with whom Sara had corresponded on various occasions. It was obvious that Nura was more than just mildly interested in learning about the “people of the Book,” as she and so many other Muslims referred to Christians and Jews. Primarily, however, Nura's questions seemed to focus on the prophet Isa, or Jesus. Sara had prayed more than once to have the opportunity to lead Nura from her limited understanding of Isa as one of the prophets of Islam to a full acceptance of Him as the Son of God. Perhaps tonight would be her opportunity.

As the two young women, separated by thousands of miles and drastically opposing cultures, began to communicate, Sara felt the first puff of cool breeze blow through her open window. She smiled and prayed as her fingers flew across the keyboard, an open Bible at her side.



Farah didn't enjoy browsing the outdoor *souqs* or even the air-conditioned malls in the same way her mother or sister did. Shopping was a joy for most Saudi women, as they had so little else to entertain or amuse them. Though some of the more progressive

fathers allowed their daughters to receive an education, even sending them to college or university, few of these educated women were able to find jobs when they graduated, though Farah knew that was changing ever so slightly. But for the most part, they continued to be dominated by the men who ran the country—and the lives of everyone in it. Those women fortunate enough to be married to men who treated them with kindness devoted their lives to caring for their husbands and children, gathering together with other women to socialize at every opportunity. Shopping was at the top of their list of pastimes, though the family income level dictated how much of that shopping time was actually spent in making purchases.

Farah understood and appreciated that her father provided them with sufficient funds for all their needs and more than a few extras besides. But none of that really mattered to her. She would rather have stayed at home, continuing in prayer through the night and sleeping a little besides. Her mother, however, had insisted that the three of them take advantage of the all-night restaurants and shopping available to them during Ramadan. It was a festive season of celebration, where gift giving to those less fortunate was required alongside prayer and fasting. And so Farah meandered through the various shops and stands, with her mother on one side and Nadia on the other, as they eyed the merchandise for sale and smelled aromas of incense and spices mixed with lamb and chicken cooking on spits. All three of the women, even Nadia who had developed early and been veiled at nearly the same time as Farah, were now cloaked in black, their faces covered and their honor intact.

As they rounded a corner and spotted their favorite restaurant across the street, Farah thought she recognized her aunt and cousin waiting for them at an inside table by the window. Though their *abayas* made it impossible to be sure, Farah's mother and aunt had prearranged the meeting, with their husbands' approval, and so it was logical to assume that the women in black who sat at the table, their heads turned in their direction as if watching for their arrival, were indeed their relatives.

Soon after the mutual identification was established and the curtains drawn over the window and around the booth, the five

of them removed their veils and relaxed, sipping coffee flavored with cardamom, eating delicate pastries, and enjoying the air-conditioned comfort of the restaurant. Though it was already after midnight, it was still nearly 100 degrees outside. Visiting with friends and family and enjoying a snack or meal at this unusual time was one more aspect of Ramadan that most Muslims enjoyed. Because they fasted throughout the day, many made it a point to go out at night and take advantage of the special late-night hours offered by many restaurants and shops throughout the month. For Farah, it was but one more distraction from the goal she had set for herself during her first official observation of Ramadan as a woman.

She wanted to connect with Allah, to hear from Him, if that was possible. She wasn't sure if it could happen, and there seemed to be no one she could ask without being dismissed or worse. There were some topics best left unspoken, and a female seeking a deeper relationship with Allah was no doubt one of them.

Farah sighed as the female chatter continued around her, and she noticed once again the resemblance between her mother and aunt. Farah's mother, Sultana, was only one year older than her sister, Sakeena, but it would be easy to mistake them for twins. Only in the last few years had Sakeena's thick black hair begun to show a little gray around the temples, making the sisters slightly more distinguishable from one another.

Farah's glance shifted to her younger companions. Nadia, scarcely thirteen, was the true beauty in the group. Her large dark eyes sparkled like shimmering pools, inviting and entertaining, mirroring her optimistic personality. No doubt she would marry young; Farah prayed she would also marry well and be happy.

Farah's cousin Nura, nearly seventeen now, expected her parents to arrange a marriage for her soon. The attractive young woman sat directly across from Farah, her dark eyes cast downward, speaking little. Farah had always liked Nura but never felt close to her because she was so quiet and reserved. Farah wondered even now what was going on behind her cousin's subdued appearance.

The conversation droned on, despite its animated tone, while Farah picked at her refreshments, saying little but smiling now

and then to indicate her interest and attention. How she longed for a trusted companion who would understand her quest! But she had long since ruled out her mother and sister, since they had no real interest in spiritual matters. They followed the law and obeyed those in authority over them; wasn't that enough?

For most women it was. But Farah was not most women, though she refused even to let herself think those words, let alone say them out loud.



Nura's mind whirled with the many new ideas she had accumulated since connecting with the young American of Saudi heritage. Sara was an enigma to Nura, her words showing her to be a humble and gentle young woman. *How can that be*, Nura wondered, *when the girl lives without any of the proper constraints of a Muslim female in the kingdom?* The primary source of conversation between the two when they met online was Islam and Christianity, Muhammad and Isa, whom the American sometimes called Jesus. But at times they veered from the subject and spoke of more personal topics, learning in the process that they were very nearly the same age. Nura would be seventeen in a few weeks, as would Sara a couple of months later. Beyond that, their lives couldn't have been more different.

Nura told herself she was glad she didn't have to contend with such frightening issues as women driving their own cars, starting their own businesses, dating and marrying men of their own choosing. The list was endless. How could a woman make such decisions and carry such responsibility? Nura knew that an increasing number of women from more liberal families in the kingdom had begun to practice such things—except for driving cars, of course—but she had also been taught that females simply were not equipped to do so, nor were they meant to. Allah had created them for their husband's pleasure, and they would only find fulfillment in serving them and bearing their children. For a woman to desire more was evil, and the punishment sure and swift. And it was all for their own good. How else could women be protected from themselves? Without the control of

men, women would destroy themselves and everyone around them with wanton and lewd behavior. Their only hope for paradise was to be faithful to Allah by obeying their male authorities without question.

And yet Sara appears to flourish without such restraints. At least, it certainly seems so from what I've come to know of her online. Is it truly possible that this young woman who lives in such a heathen land could be happy and fulfilled by pursuing her own dreams and making her own choices?

The very thought seemed blasphemous, and Nura shuddered at the implications. Pulling her thoughts from her earlier discussion with her American counterpart, Nura tried to focus on the conversation between her mother and her aunt, as they chatted nearly nonstop. Nura's younger cousin, Nadia, seemed to hang on the women's every word, but Nadia's older sister appeared nearly as disinterested as Nura felt. Was it possible the two cousins had similar feelings and concerns? If so, how could Nura be certain? To broach the subject would be dangerous. Still . . .

No. She would keep her thoughts to herself and speak only with Sara online. No one else must ever know the traitorous questions that danced through Nura's head.

Forcing a smile, she took a deep breath and determined to pay attention to the conversation between her mother and aunt. It was anything but fascinating, but at least it was safe.

Once in the chat room, Nura was
disappointed to see that Sara
wasn't there.

Chapter 3



SARA WONDERED WHY SHE'D BOTHERED TO SHOWER. SHE hadn't been dressed for more than five minutes, and already she felt nearly as sticky as when she'd first rolled out of bed. Of course, staying up for hours to talk with Nura certainly hadn't helped overcome her feeling of being ill-prepared to face the day.

An impatient knock on the door snagged her attention, and she knew it was her brother, Emir.

"You going to be in there all day?" he grouched. "You're not the only one that needs to get ready for school, you know."

She smiled. Her brother was slightly over a year younger than she was, and the two of them had spent their growing-up years verbally sparring with one another, and yet they were as close as any two siblings could ever be. Emir was a pain at times, but Sara loved him unconditionally.

"I'll be out in a minute," she called.

Peering into the bathroom mirror, she grudgingly admitted that her few dabs of makeup weren't going to hide her

red-rimmed eyes. This was definitely going to be a rare sunglasses day in a corner of the world that was much more used to seeing umbrellas and raincoats.

If only I'd been able to get through to her, she thought. She'd seemed so interested at first, but she always does. And then, just when I get her to the point of making a choice to receive Jesus as her Savior, she backs off and says she has to think about it some more.

Sara sighed. She couldn't really blame Nura. After all, the girl lived in the Saudi Kingdom, and making such a decision was not something that was done lightly. Though Sara had never been to Saudi Arabia, her mother had told her many stories of what it was like for women in such a repressed country. Sara understood to a point, but it was nearly impossible to put herself in her counterpart's shoes and imagine life without the many freedoms she herself enjoyed.

She shrugged, giving her shoulder-length black hair one final shake before heading downstairs to grab a quick breakfast. If she hurried, her dad would be able to drop her at school on his way to work, and she could avoid arriving at her destination feeling any more damp and disheveled than she already did. How glad she would be when this onslaught of late-summer heat moved on and the little southwest Washington town of River Crest returned to its normal gray, cloudy, wet weather. Sara had never lived anywhere else, and she had no problem dealing with cool summers and even cooler winters. The occasional sun breaks were nice, but anything over ninety degrees was simply not acceptable to Pacific Northwest natives like Sara and her family.



Another day of fasting and prayer was nearly at an end, and Farah fought disappointment at not having sensed anything different. She had been so hopeful going into this Ramadan season that this would be the year she would experience a new level of faith in Allah. Though she would never say the words aloud, as she didn't want to imply that Allah had made a mistake by creating her as he had, there were times she couldn't help but wish she

had been born a male. How different her life would have been, and how much more open she could be in her pursuit of worship and religion!

She lifted herself from her prayer mat and stepped slowly toward the open window, gazing outside from the second story of her family's modest but comfortable home. Though no longer as visible as during the hours of mid-day, Farah knew that lingering heat still shimmered upward from the baking pavement. She imagined it rising to the skies, along with the prayers of the faithful Muslims of Riyadh and elsewhere, and her heart cried out for a touch from the great creator, Allah himself.

Startled by the thought, she wondered if indeed it was a blasphemous desire. How could someone like her expect anything in the way of a personal touch from one so mighty as Allah? Was she being prideful and vain even to imagine it? Ashamed and frightened, she returned to her prayer mat, bowing with her face to the ground, her heart more troubled than ever before.



It had been a long day, but the final bell had at last released the antsy students. Relieved, the high schoolers burst through the double glass doors of the school building and flowed out onto the streets of River Crest, spreading out in all directions as the scorching afternoon sun enveloped them in stifling heat.

Sara trudged in her usual direction toward home, her full backpack resisting her every step.

"What are you going to do the rest of the day?" Joni asked, plodding along beside her.

Sara answered her friend while keeping her eyes straight ahead. "Homework, I guess." She shrugged. "What else?"

She heard the younger girl sigh. "Yeah, I know. It's too hot to do anything outside."

They continued in silence for another moment before Joni spoke up again. "We could go to the mall. At least it's air conditioned."

Sara had to admit that anywhere cool sounded good at the moment. But the mall? Nah. She just wasn't in the mood to go

anywhere with a lot of people, and the mall was always crowded. Today would be worse than usual, as everyone sought a respite from the unusual heat wave.

“I don’t think so,” she said. She knew she should say something more, offer an alternative or reasonable option, but her mind was blank. She had no idea what she wanted to do; she only knew that she didn’t want to go to the mall.

Somewhere quiet, she thought. *Somewhere I can think and pray*. But Joni wouldn’t understand. Sara liked Joni. They lived on the same block and had been friends since grammar school, though Joni was actually a couple of years younger than Sara. Also, Joni wasn’t a believer—well, at least not one who showed any serious commitment to what she claimed to believe. And lately Sara had felt the need to connect with believers who shared her passion. She was sick of compromise and lukewarm faith, tired of Sunday-only worship. She wanted more. She wanted her life to count for something, to make a difference somehow. How could she do that if she hung out with people whose primary topic of conversation was what to wear the next day?

Keeping her thoughts to herself, Sara pressed on, with Joni walking silently beside her. The heat was so oppressive that it made it easier not to talk. By the time they reached Joni’s house, Sara wanted nothing more than to plunk down in front of her fan with a cold drink and listen to the quiet for a while. Maybe later she’d log into the chat room and see if she could make a little more headway with Nura.

Sara said good-bye to Joni as the slightly chubby blonde girl who was so opposite Sara in nearly every way veered off up her walkway toward her front door. The new school year was only a couple of weeks old, but already it seemed they were falling into a routine of walking to and from school together, though they had little in common anymore beyond that. As Sara watched Joni step inside her house and close the door behind her, she shot up a silent prayer that one day soon Joni would at last see the need to get serious about her faith. She just hoped her childhood friend wouldn’t put it off too long.



Nura couldn't wait for the night to end, not so much because she was looking forward to another day of fasting and prayer but because her American friend often logged in to the chat room at that time. As Nura's day began, Sara's was drawing to a close, and it seemed she nearly always allowed for some Internet time. Occasionally the two girls chatted about their days, and though Nura hated to admit it, she was fascinated at hearing about Sara's life at school and with her friends, particularly now that Sara had started her senior year of high school. In fairness, Sara also asked Nura about her life and seemed interested in her replies, including the fact that Nura's studies were done at home, under her mother's watchful eye.

Once in the chat room, Nura was disappointed to see that Sara wasn't there. Still, there were others she could talk with—or just “listen in on” for a while—until Sara arrived.

Nura smiled. *I should be grateful that I have a father who allows me such a luxury as my own computer! If he didn't trust me, he would never have given me such an amazing gift.* She knew that many of her friends were only allowed to use computers in their homes under strict supervision, and some couldn't use them at all. Nura appreciated her freedom and didn't want to abuse it, yet she knew she was dancing dangerously close to the edge by visiting this chat room. If her father ever found out...

But how could he? She certainly wouldn't tell him, and he never came to her room and checked up on her, simply because she had never given him reason to do so. Her mother, on the other hand, came to her room quite often, but never without knocking. Even if she did come in uninvited, she wouldn't know how to turn on her daughter's computer, let alone find her way to a chat room. Nura was safe in her explorations of Western life and discussions with nonpracticing Muslims—though she knew her parents would consider such people traitors to the faith.

Sara's name popped up on the screen, snagging Nura's attention and causing her heart to leap with anticipation. It was as if the girl in America had become her closest friend and confidante, though the two had never met.