

# Caged in America

## One Woman's Journey through the Veil

By Jasmine Sharif

## **Dedication**

I give all my light and glory to Allah who has made the writing of this book possible. I send love to my mother for the strength she passed on to me. I thank all those dedicated people at the women's shelters and safe houses who helped me find a new life, especially those at the Rise. I send my deepest appreciation to my friends in Bloomington who have become my new family. I especially wish to thank my neighbor Gail who has been a true sister. She has been a healing medicine for both my body and soul. I give all my love to Susan, my ghostwriter, and very patient friend. Last, but not least, I send my most profound devotion to my only true cousin, Hanna, and my three darling children, Danya, Mohamed and Soloman.

## **Author's Note**

This is the true story of my life in America. Names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

# Chapter 1

## Dreaming of Prince Charming

The morning of Tumasha's wedding, our house strained with excitement and anxiety. Strident love songs boomed from the radio in her bedroom. Dishes rattled in the kitchen below and our parents' staccato conversation echoed up the stairs. I blinked tired eyes, having slept little in the small room I shared with my younger sister, Huria. She had no such problem, curled beneath a tan blanket on her ratty bed, white skin looking less Arabic than the rest of us, too young to realize the importance of the day.

I was old enough to know. This was the day every Yemeni girl dreamed of, the marriage to her Prince Charming, the day she transformed from daughter into wife. In our world there were few things for a girl to look forward to, making those moments and days precious.

I slid from bed until my feet touched the wooden floor. The single fixture marking the sloped ceiling had been turned off overnight, but our room brightened with morning sun from the window overlooking the street. I gathered the purple dress spread neatly across my dresser and held it between myself and the foggy mirror, trying to get a sense of my reflection. At eight years, my body was like a boy's. I lacked thirteen-year-old Tumasha's breasts and hips, but that was fine with me. When it came to boys, I preferred playing soccer to romance, though that did not dim my envy for her impending marriage.

"I don't care!" Tumasha yelled above her music. "If they do not marry me to him, I'll run away. I swear!" My older brother, Mouzi, said something and Tumasha screamed back at him. A door slammed.

Returning the dress to its place, I cracked open our door and peered out in time to see Mouzi stride to his room across the unlighted hallway. No doubt he had been badgering Tumasha as he bullied everyone in the household.

Thinking myself safe, I opened the door wider and crept past Mouzi's room toward the stairs, but I was neither quiet nor fast enough. Mouzi's door flung open and he suddenly stood in front of me, blocking my way with his wide body, an evil look on his usually handsome face.

"No, Mouzi," I whispered.

Without a word, he grabbed my arm and punched me deeply in the stomach. Gasping for air, I crumpled to the floor.

"Gahba!" Mouzi cursed, as he had heard Father do countless times.

"Stop, Mouzi," I whimpered.

"Little bitch."

It was no use fighting, so I laid there, waiting for his shadow to move. Normally, after one punch, Mouzi would leave me in peace. That morning he was more agitated than usual. He paced down the hallway and returned to kick me.

"Why do you do this?" I pleaded. "Why must you beat me?"

"Shut up," he hissed.

Father had pitted us siblings against each other since we were born. Mouzi and Munsee were encouraged to dominate, while we girls were put down. Mouzi was actually second-born, but father told everyone that he and Tumasha were twins so that he would have a

firstborn son, not a daughter. Maybe that was why Mouzi was more angry than usual. Tumasha was marrying first and getting too much attention.

I crawled to Tumasha's door.

"Where do you think you're going, bitch?" Mouzi's foot swung toward me, but missed. From my knees, I turned the doorknob and escaped into my sister's domain.

"Get out of here," Tumasha said over the slow drumming of another love song. Her room was a mirror image of my own, except she had a large bed all to herself. She sat on rumpled sheets and thick woolen blankets, back propped against the wooden headboard. While Huria was light in complexion, Tumasha was darker than any of us.

"Mouzi hit me."

"I don't care." She glared through dark eyes void of compassion. In our house there was no room for pity. Only the strong survived, and to be strong you had to bury your emotions.

My lip trembled. Though Tumasha ignored me most of the time, I held on to the hope that one day we would be intimate the way sisters should be. I had thought that since she was getting married, she might soften her heart for me as she had for her new husband, Asser.

"I said, get out," she said. "I have other things to do than worry about that bastard."

"I just--"

"Now! Get out of my fucking room!"

"Okay!" I opened her door and saw Mouzi had gone.

Walking on tiptoes, I went downstairs to the kitchen, which now occupied two adjoining rooms. In one, a metal pot of Yemeni tea simmered on the stove, spilling scents of clove and mint. The sink was filled with dirty pans and dishes waiting for me. In the other room, a long wooden table mottled with black knotholes held a plate containing half a dozen Yemeni cookies and two empty cups. Tall closets lined the walls except for the spot where Mom's sewing machine stood.

Like all women in her home village Mom had learned how to sew in her youth, but by all accounts she had been something special. Even after marrying Father, she retained a passion for sewing and it showed in the fine detail of her work. Now she sewed for many Yemeni wives and was popular because her work was quick and perfect. She earned lots of money making dresses, which was a godsend to us girls. Father gave my brothers money and gifts, but if we girls needed shoes and clothing, it was up to Mom to provide those things.

Hissam cried from the bedroom at the front of the house. Mom would be too busy nursing the baby to care about me, but I was used to that. I cooked, cleaned and babysat younger siblings most days and had expected to be in charge of the house while Mom and Tumasha prepared for the wedding.

I helped myself to tea, pouring it through a sieve to filter loose tea leaves, cloves, cardamom and mint leaves. Evaporated canned milk had already been added to the mix. For the best tea, one should let it simmer until it is brown and thick. This tea was not dark enough, but I lacked patience to wait. Sipping gingerly from the steaming mug, I walked to the adjoining room and helped myself to leftover Yemeni cookies. The crunchy sesame seed treats made a good breakfast with tea.

Alone in the kitchen, I sat on a chair facing Mom's sewing machine. I had looked forward to this day. Weddings were always a fun time. Even in summer heat, women would

remove their scarves and dance late into the night. They would laugh and sing and be free for a time. I should be happy. Instead, I felt a deep emptiness.

"My sister is getting married," I whispered. "I cannot believe it." I missed her and she was not yet gone. I rubbed my stomach where Mouzi had punched me, but refused to acknowledge the pain.

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"Shabat!" Mom called. My name is Jasmine, but Mom had a nickname for each of us. Mine was Shabat, or Lefty, because I was left handed. It is really an insult to be called Shabat because the left hand is unclean, but I was just a girl and did not understand the implications then. Maybe if she had called me by my real name, my life would have turned out better. Maybe that is why nicknames are forbidden in the Qur'an. *Neither defame one another nor call one another by nicknames. Bad it is to be called wicked after having professed the faith and whoso repent not of this are doers of wrong.*

I stopped washing dishes and dried my hands.

"Jasmine!"

"Yes, Mama." I hurried from the kitchen and through the living room. Dark blue tapestries on the wall made the room dim. Mom seemed to find shadow comforting. I found it depressing.

Mom and Tumasha were in Mom's bedroom with the two youngest kids. Hissam looked like a little angel in his white sleeper. Toddler Jerraf clung to Mom's leg to steady herself.

"Tumasha and I are going to get her dress," Mom said. Her wide face and cheeks were a reminder of her Beni Musleh roots. Today, she covered her hair with a black scarf as usual, but instead of a plain house dress, she wore a dress with silver trim and a red bead necklace. "You watch the babies."

"Yes, Mama."

"And get the kitchen cleaned up. The women are coming this afternoon."

I nodded.

It was difficult to clean while caring for babies. When I asked for help, Huria ignored me. Mouzi left the house. He had been spending less and less time at home. I often smelled cigarettes on his breath and clothing and suspected he was hanging out with the wrong kind of boys, but said nothing. No one would listen to me anyway.

By mid-afternoon a dozen women had gathered in the kitchen. One brought henna to paint Tumasha's body. Others brought flat breads, tabouleh and hummus. Gossip and good wishes echoed through the house.

The women played drums and sang village songs. When Tumasha complained that her dress pinched or her hair wasn't quite right, Mom rushed to and fro, trying to get things just perfect. In the excitement, I forgot my sadness. I could not wait for the wonderful celebration.

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Weddings I had attended before were held in large halls, but Tumasha's was being hosted at Uncle Gaban's house, just five blocks from ours. Since Tumasha was taking so long to get ready, Huria and I were allowed to run ahead. Mom usually spat on a napkin and told us we needed to be home before it dried. This day she was too busy to bother.

We slipped into our worn dress shoes at the door and ran to the sidewalk. I held her hand and we rushed past two story houses built one next to the other along our street. We

cut down a side alley and were soon at my uncle's door.

When we entered, heat hit my face. The living room was crowded with women in handcrafted dresses made of silks and accented with embroidery and glitter. Aunt Mouzia was meticulous with her house, not believing in clutter. There were no pictures or knickknacks, only three long couches and a huge shelving unit on one wall housing a TV and stereo. I wondered what she thought of all these Arabic women sitting shoulder to shoulder on her floor. Soon they would be dropping crumbs and grinding dirt into her carpet with their dancing. Already, the room so sweltered with body heat that her glossy white walls were sweating. Only women were allowed in my uncle's house; the men would gather at another location.

Free from prying eyes, women let down their scarves, revealing faces covered with so much makeup they looked like ghosts. I recognized many of them anyway because they had either come to our house to buy dresses from Mom or deposit something in the battered metal security box she kept under her bed. They would bring jewelry or cash or important papers for safe keeping, *so my husband will not find them*. Women united in a common deception.

A little later I noticed Aunt Absa, Mom's half-sister. She was a bad memory in our family, divorcing her husband and running off with another man, leaving six children behind. Like everyone, I blamed her. She was the woman and automatically in the wrong. Uncle Gaban had not punished her, which made him weak in everyone's eyes. If Father had been in his place, Aunt Absa would not be alive.

Yemeni weddings take place behind closed doors, usually at the bride's house. The sheikh, local head of the mosque, oversees proceedings. Fathers sit across from each other and other men attend as witnesses according to Islamic law. Promises of payment in money and gold are made and the husband and bride, often strangers to each other, are married before being presented to the crowd. That is when the celebration really begins.

It seemed we waited forever for the bride and groom to appear. When they did finally arrive, Asser's entrance drove the women into a frantic rush to cover themselves. Tumasha was beautiful in a full white wedding gown that accentuated her breasts. Asser cradled her elbow, looking shorter than usual in his white tuxedo. His jet black hair and mustache had been neatly trimmed, but, to me, he still seemed greasy. As much as I tried, I could not understand why Tumasha was attracted to Asser. Something about him made my skin crawl.

Women cheered and clapped; many *zaghreeded*, trilling their tongues so loudly it gave me goose bumps. Mom was loudest of all.

Asser seated Tumasha and she sank into the folds of her dress, her entire body nearly swallowed in fabric. I had always seen Tumasha as the big sister; in that moment she looked so tiny and fragile I could not help but to fear for her. She seemed happy, but she was still a child like me, and now was expected to be a wife to this greasy man. Asser sat before the audience, fed Tumasha cake, and excused himself to attend the men's party at Beit Hanina Hall.

Women removed their scarves once again. Yemeni music filled the room; Faisal Alawi's fast paced melodies had everyone dancing. Breads and pies and Arabic coffee were served. Mom ordered pizza and opened bottles of soda pop. I played with other children in the basement where it was cool and soon forgot Tumasha. I forgot I would have added responsibility with my older sister gone. It was a night for celebrating and merriment.

At midnight Father came into the house like a dark storm, bad leg clomping on the floor overhead. "Quiet down," he bellowed. "Shut off the music!"

The music stopped.

"It is time to go home. None of you should be out this late."

Huria and I climbed from the basement. Father stood with hands on hips. He was much older than Mom, with gray hair and fine dark eyebrows. His eyes were bloodshot and his thin lips formed a scowl. Uncle Gaban stood behind him, eyelids heavy from drinking.

"Go home!" Father said.

Women scurried, tightening scarves and gathering dishes. A few spiteful eyes glanced Father's direction, but no one said a word.

I took Huria's hand. "Time to go," I said.

"Hurry," Father barked. "The party is over."

Asser pushed through the flow of fleeing women and whisked Tumasha outside, leaving my parents, Huria, me and my aunt and uncle alone.

"Look at this mess," Aunt Mouzia said. "Now I am left to clean it all."

Father looked at Uncle Gaban and nodded. He had been worried neighbors would call the police about the noise, that they would discover Tumasha had been married. She was only thirteen and this was America, not Yemen.

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Unlike most of the girls in our Dearborn community, Tumasha chose the man she would marry. She had met Asser through someone at school and, for weeks, had been obsessing over him and making plans. She even convinced Asser to step up to his father and demand to marry her. Asser's father finally gave in and met with Father at our house, where they agreed on a bride price of \$20,000. When anyone puts money into Father's hand he is usually happy. But this time he was anxious.

"So, how the hell are we going to pull this off?" I overheard Asser's father ask.

"We will keep it secret." Father's voice was steady, but I sensed some doubt.

"I'm not going to jail over this," Asser's father said. In America there were laws against marrying a girl so young. Asser was over eighteen and they could all be in serious trouble. But that did not stop them.

"We will have a small wedding at her uncle Gaban's house. Nobody will bust us."

"Are you sure?"

"The key is not to invite too many people," Father said. "My wife is crazy, she'll invite the whole world if I let her. If we keep it small, no one outside will know."

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The wedding had been small by Yemeni standards, but the woman enjoyed celebrating anyway. As the last of them exited, Mom stood quietly next to me, her beautiful light complexion accentuated by a dark scarf. I noticed tears in her eyes.

*She will not cry at my wedding.* I wouldn't marry too young. I wouldn't marry a greasy man. She would be proud and happy on my wedding day.

"Let's go," Father said, hobbling through the door. Mom followed several paces behind, holding her scarf tight against the night breeze.