



BARAKAH BEATS



Maleeha Siddiqui



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Today's a big day for me—it's my Ameen. My family and I are celebrating me finishing my study of the Qur'an, and it looks like everyone in Northern Virginia was on the guest list. There are more than a hundred people in the banquet hall, all wearing nice suits or formal shalwar kameez. My best friend, Jenna Birdie, sticks out like a sore thumb with her white-blond hair and periwinkle halter dress, especially next to me in my fancy green lehenga, which is basically a full-length embroidered skirt. But I'm glad she's here. I need the moral support.

“Just how many people did you invite?” Jenna whispers in my ear after the tenth person comes over to say salaam

and hand me an envelope full of money. “They can’t *all* be your family.”

“No, just half of them,” I say. Jenna’s jaw drops.

When I finally have some space, I pick up the poofy skirt of my lehenga and we escape across the room to Mama and Baba, who are fiddling with the microphone onstage.

“Must be a big deal,” Jenna says, looking around. “Reading the Qur’an, I mean.”

I didn’t just *read* the Qur’an. I memorized it by heart, making me a hafiza—someone who has completed the Hifz. And it *is* a big deal. That’s why Mama and Baba wanted everyone to be here.

Jenna’s leaving for a two-week tour of the UAE tomorrow, so she came *this close* to missing out. I’m glad she could make it. Jenna rarely gets to see the Pakistani Muslim side of my life even though we’ve been friends since we were four. We met at the park back when both of our moms stayed home. Jenna asked if I wanted to be a superhero with her. Together, we saved the park from certain doom, and that was that. We were friends for life. We had tons of playdates, and because we’re

neighbors, when Mrs. Birdie went back to work Jenna would always come over after school until one of her parents picked her up.

We used to talk about how we wished we went to the same school. Jenna has gone to public school her whole life, and I was homeschooled until I was eight. But then my parents enrolled me in Guided Light Academy's Hifz program, a private Islamic school, and we stopped talking about it. It's not like it affected my friendship with Jenna, anyway. I mean, come on. She gave me a Spider-Man sketchbook as a gift today. That's art and Tom Holland in one. You really can't know me better than that.

Onstage, Mama and Baba have to stop what they're doing to greet guests. Mama looks as uncomfortable as I feel in my heavy lehenga. She's not a fan of huge parties, and she's never been good at hiding it. I meet her eyes and she makes a silent choking face.

"Yes, Nimra graduated with top tajweed in her class," I overhear Baba say proudly to a man standing next to him. Baba's a hafiz, too. He doesn't mention that I ranked first out of only three girls, but I let him have his moment.

"Here, Mama." I give her the envelopes I collected.

“You’re just going to hand over all that money?” Jenna squeals. “It’s yours! You earned it!”

“No, honey,” says Mama. “In Islam, kids pay the party bill.” Judging by her reaction, I don’t think Jenna gets the joke.

“Four years of hard work, Nimmy,” Baba says, coming over to us. He hugs me to his side. “It paid off, didn’t it?”

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” I say. “I’ll never forget how you helped me get through Surah al-Baqarah.” It’s the longest and hardest chapter of the Qur’an to memorize. I would have given up without Baba’s help.

“Nimra, please don’t make him cry,” says Mama. “He was getting emotional last night and this morning, too.”

“I—I was not!” Baba sputters. “Well. Only a little.”

“By the way, Reema and Hana can’t make it,” Mama says. “Reema’s mom texted to tell me the kids are sick, and Hana’s family ended up going to a funeral.”

“Oh. Okay.” Reema and Hana are the two other girls I did Hifz with. I feel bad that they aren’t going to be here, but I’m a lot closer to Jenna than either of them. They’re not my *best* friends. I’m kind of happy that I don’t have to share my time with Jenna before she leaves. She’s been

busy with volleyball camp all summer and I barely get to see her anymore.

Nano appears at the stage with us. She's an older version of Mama, just slightly wrinklier, but I wouldn't tell her that. My grandmother loves when people think *I'm* her daughter.

"Maryam, what's taking so long?" she asks. "We need to get on with the program so the food can be served. It's rude to keep delaying."

"I'm still working on it, Mama," my mom says exasperatedly. "It hasn't been five minutes since the last time you asked." Mama's whole body tenses as she swats the microphone with her palm like it'll magically fix itself.

I pull on Nano's hand, refusing to let them argue. "Can we take pictures now?"

"Pehle yeh say karo," says Nano. She bends down to pull up my lehenga's waist until it feels like I have a wedge and straightens my hijab. "There. Now let's go. Jenna can come, too."

I stand through picture after picture with my aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and grandparents. It hurts to keep smiling, and I'm definitely going to have blisters on my

feet. Just when I think it's never going to be over, Baba's voice booms through the speakers. "Testing one, two. Assalamu alaikum. Thank you, everyone, for coming out today to celebrate our daughter's great accomplishment. If I can please have you all take a seat. In shaa Allah, Nimra is going to say a few words and recite Surah Yasin for us."

"You're going to do what?" Jenna looks confused.

"I have to recite part of the Qur'an for our guests. It's tradition." Dread creeps over me. I'd rather take a hundred more pictures than go up there in front of everyone. "Wish me luck," I say, and with a deep breath, I plaster on a fake smile and head back to the stage alone. Baba passes me the mic with a reassuring nod.

*Don't mess up, Nimra, don't mess up at your own Ameen.
Everyone is watching.*

I squeeze my eyes closed, wrap my hands tightly around the mic, and begin reciting Surah Yasin. It holds all the essential lessons of the Qur'an. I picked it out myself. Slowly, the familiar Arabic words flow easier and I'm brave enough to open my eyes again. As I stare out at the restaurant filled with people who have come out to support me, I feel something flutter inside my chest. This

book brings all Muslims together and now I've got it word for word inside my head. I never thought about how cool that is.

Everyone claps when I'm done. I totally hear Baba sniffing behind me, but I know I nailed it when I spot Sister Sadia, my Hifz teacher, looking up at me onstage with shining eyes. I search the room for Jenna, eager to see what she thinks, and spot her sitting at a corner table by herself . . . looking down at her phone in her lap.

She wasn't even watching.

My stomach sinks, but I try not to let it hurt. Jenna's not Muslim, so I get why she's not *that* interested. My parents have always pushed me to make more Muslim friends. Not because they're better or anything, just, you know, *principle*. But what's the point in making other friends when I have Jenna? At least she's still here. So what if she doesn't get my faith? I don't understand why she likes sports, and they're a huge part of her life.

Now that the reading is over, the guests run toward the buffet like their chairs are on fire. It's their fault they're so hungry. Most of them showed up *one whole hour* after the time on the invitation.

“I’ll make you a plate,” Mama offers with her hands on my shoulders.

“First, I want to help you cut the cake,” I say. Baba ordered my favorite—fresh vanilla cream and strawberry—with the words *Congratulations, Hafiza Nimra!* written on top in green icing. I want a big piece of cake more than the biryani being served. It’s not Nano’s biryani, so it’s not going to taste as good anyway.

Jenna comes over to help, too. She and I hand Mama and Nano plates and spoons as they cut up pieces of cake. I start making a rainbow pattern on the table with the napkins and Jenna copies me. She sticks her finger in one slice and licks off the frosting. Then she tries to sneak-attack a glob on my nose. I make giggle-gagging noises while fending her off.

It’s only then that I hear what Mama and Nano are talking about.

“Did you see that article I sent you?” says Nano. “See how hot your field is right now? Companies are practically begging for people! Why did you go to college if you weren’t going to use your degree?”