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The Letter

by Lesley Dawson

The letter from her brother came out of the blue and it took her some time to understand its contents. Having had to get used to life in Italy with all its complexities, Amal was now learning about of the hidden traps in American society for unwary immigrants. What had seemed so easy when she was a visitor, was not so now she was a resident. The suddenness of people offering her undying friendship and then just as equally quickly forgetting who she was the next time they met was deeply disturbing. This was not the Palestinian way. There you offered your friendship openly and never withdrew the offer.

Still smarting over the way this woman had completely ignored her at the shopping mall today after having drooled all over her yesterday at Nicole's barbecue, Amal needed some quiet time to reflect. This would be a good time to read Daud's letter.

Being a language graduate, he usually composed beautiful letters, in Arabic or in English. This letter showed none of that calmness and consideration she expected from him. His usual beautiful script was untidy and indecipherable in places. It was only after reading it through twice that Amal understood that Daud was very angry with her. Why was he angry with her? She was thousands of miles away and he now lived in Jordan. With a sinking heart she realized that she was the focus of his anger and soon worked out why.

The shadow of her past behaviour was looming over him. Daud had married his cousin Nasra and was living and working in Amman. This was not such a big change from Beit Jala as just about every second Jordanian had Palestinian ancestors. Reading on, Amal discovered that Daud had applied for a job at the Pontifical Mission in Amman and had been interviewed by a guy who was a business graduate from Bethlehem University, Mike Kattan. Apparently, the interview had gone very well until, looking again at Daud's family name and place of birth he began to frown.

"Was it your sister who had an affair with a Muslim guy when she was a student at BU?"

"Well, it never got as far as an affair. They did spend a lot of time together when they were students," swallowing nervously Daud cursed Amal and her romantic dalliances. "She is now in the USA and married to a Catholic guy who taught at BU. Do you remember Dr Joe Malham? At the time we all thought he was a Brother because he lived and their house."

Mike smiled with relief, he had no desire to employ someone from his home town whose family were tainted. He was an ambitious young man and wanted to be promoted in the Pontifical Mission and maybe sent to Rome for further training. Nothing must interfere with that.

Amal read on that Daud had got the job he sought but that he was angry with her for causing him such embarrassment. He hoped she would stay far away in America and not interfere in the lives of her siblings anymore. His last sentence stirred her emotions and raised her blood pressure even higher, so that her breathing quickened.

"Your family's never in your past. You carry it around with you everywhere."

She must return Daud's letter, congratulating him on his new job and apologizing for embarrassing him. How she wished she could turn back the clock to that first day at BU. Given her time over again, she would have ignored the handsome Muslim boy from Tulkarem and concentrated her attentions on those rich Christian boys from Jerusalem.