

"Uzma Jalaluddin is one of the best writers in romance today—and this gorgeous book proves it."—SARAH MacLEAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Heartbreaker*

Much Ado About Nada



UZMA JALALUDDIN
AUTHOR OF *AYESHA AT LAST*

PRAISE FOR *MUCH ADO ABOUT NADA*

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*Much
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Nada*

Uzma Jalaluddin

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TO IMTIAZ, FOR EVERYTHING

PART ONE

Once upon a time at a Muslim convention . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Present day

Nada Syed was no coward; at twenty-eight years old, she had simply learned that strategic retreat was the better part of valor.

Cell phone clutched in one hand, black ballet flats in the other, cream-colored hijab loosely draped over her short, dark hair, she tiptoed down the spiral oak staircase of the home she shared with her parents and two brothers. She crept toward the laundry room, which had a side entrance that led to the driveway, her car, and freedom. As she reached the door to the laundry room, her phone pinged with another message from her best friend, Haleema: I'll be there soon! We're going to have so much fun at the convention!

Nada shuddered. There were few things she could think of that would be worse than being forced to attend the Islamic convention over a hot July weekend. Perhaps skinny-dipping in the Arctic Ocean. Or being forced to eat her mother's offal-and-tongue *nihari* curry.

Her phone pinged again. Haleema really didn't give up; that persistence had fueled her rise to the top of her graduate engineering program, but right now, Nada wished her friend had the profile of a party-forward humanities major, because Nada needed to concentrate. Coordinating a covert weekend outing was tricky. Her mother, Narjis Syed, guarded their front door more zealously than a nightclub bouncer and asked more questions. Nada glanced at her phone, reading her friend's messages quickly.

Aren't you excited? Girls' weekend! Then: Babe? Where's my sister from another mister? Nada? HELLOOOOOOO????

Haleema wasn't going to stop until Nada responded. Carefully dropping her shoes and slipping her feet into them, she texted her friend the perfect decoy message: Just getting ready. Big plans for the weekend! xxx.

Nada knew two things: 1) she couldn't attend the convention for reasons that couldn't be disclosed to anyone, especially not Haleema and 2) by the time her habitually late bff showed up at Nada's house, she would be long gone, snacking on a delicious latte and blueberry scone from her favorite café.

One might wonder why a twenty-eight-year-old woman didn't simply stroll out of her parents' house as if she owned the place, flip her busybody neighbors a flirty goodbye, and head to wherever the hell she wanted. That person was clearly not the daughter of traditional South Asian parents, nor did they live in the Golden Crescent neighborhood in the east end of Toronto, a.k.a. "the nosiest place on Earth." And they were particularly not the daughter of Narjis Syed, mother of three, interferer of all.

The side-door escape was the perfect plan, Nada thought, opening the door to the laundry room.

"Beta, what are you doing?" Narjis straightened in front of the washing machine, where she was sorting through a pile of clothing.

Busted.

"Answer your mom, Nada."

Framed in the doorway, her best friend, Haleema Olawi—pretty, perky, perfect—lifted one perfectly threaded eyebrow.

Double busted.

"Your friend has been waiting for you this last half-hour," her mother scolded, closing the washing machine door with a snap. She was a plump, diminutive woman, just barely five feet tall. Like Nada, she had full eyebrows and dark, knowing eyes. Her gray-streaked hair was gathered in its habitual braid. She and Haleema both stared at Nada, waiting for an explanation, but Nada's mind blanked.

Haleema had always possessed an innate ability to charm the aunts, and she used this superpower to full effect now, gracefully lifting her hands in frustration. "Honestly, Narjis Aunty, I don't know what to do with this

one! Zayn got us free passes to the convention, plus a hotel room. I even have tickets to the matrimonial speed-dating event, and your daughter tries to back out at the last minute.”

Narjis’s eyes gleamed at the mention of matrimonial speed-dating, and Nada contemplated making a run for it. But Haleema had been on the track team at university and would hunt her down. Nada went with the snarky approach instead.

“When was the first minute?” she asked.

Haleema ignored her. Instead, Nada’s soon-to-be-ex-friend widened her eyes. “Can you believe Nada hasn’t even met my fiancé yet? Zayn’s family runs Deen&Dunya, you know. Imagine, my best friend too busy to meet the man I’m about to marry!”

Deen&Dunya—Arabic for “faith and life”—was a massive Muslim convention held in downtown Toronto over a July weekend. It was like Comic-Con, except with hijabs, *jilbabs*, beards, and *kufi* skullcaps rather than intricate fan-created costumes. Nada had managed to avoid the convention since it first launched five years ago. This avoidance had little to do with Zayn, but Haleema refused to believe that, and now Nada was trapped between a long-held secret and her best friend’s willful personality.

Haleema was the only daughter of wealthy entrepreneurs who lived in Dubai. It was true that she was a little bit spoiled and used to getting her own way, but she had always been a good friend to Nada. And it was also true that Nada had been ducking an introduction to Zayn for three months, the entire length of Haleema’s whirlwind engagement. There was a certain inevitability to this moment, Nada realized, and as a good Muslim, she should know better than to keep fighting her fate.

“I was just on my way to pick up some coffee?” Nada tried, a last-ditch attempt at escape. She had never been one to give in quietly.

Her mother wrinkled her brow. “Waste of money. *Chalo*, I’ll make you some chai while you pack for the convention. Make sure to bring a pretty dress.” Narjis walked toward the large kitchen at the back of the house.

“And put on something cute,” Haleema added. “You never know who you might meet.”

Shooting her friend a “this isn’t over” glare, Nada made her way to her bedroom. It was a good-sized room with two windows and an en suite bathroom. She had decorated in muted creams and beige. The bright, geometric cover on her Ikea Hemnes double bed was the only splash of color, the result of a failed attempt at reinvention years ago.

She hesitated at the door to her walk-in closet, her eyes drawn to the very back, where she had carefully hidden a large floral hatbox behind her overflow-hijab storage unit, beside her collection of salwar kameez. Inside the hatbox was . . . Nada shook her head. No time for that line of thinking. It was fine. The convention would be fine. It had been years and years and . . . everything was fine.

She threw a long dress, heels, and a matching hijab into a backpack, along with some toiletries, then changed into a navy-blue jumpsuit, an oversized blazer, and a pink hijab.

In the hallway, she bumped into her father.

Abbas Syed was a tall, thin man, an accountant by trade but a mediator by inclination. His thinning hair was streaked with gray, as was his carefully cultivated mustache. He looked at her from behind round glasses that magnified his large brown eyes, no doubt wondering why she was in a rush—and what he could do to help. Abbas was forever trailing after his enraged wife or irritated children, calming everyone down and smoothing the path back to grudging family tolerance. Her father had only ever wanted one thing: that his whole family live together under one roof forever. This wish had led him to buy a large house at the edge of the Golden Crescent, with enough bedrooms and bathrooms for everyone, and a driveway big enough to accommodate a fleet of cars. He had also encouraged his eldest son, Waqas, to move into the renovated basement apartment with his new bride when he had married ten years ago, when Nada was finishing high school.

Waqas still lived there. Unfortunately, his now ex-wife had moved out six years ago. They shared custody of their twin daughters.

As her father’s large brown eyes peered at her, Nada explained her haste. “Haleema is here to pick me up. We’re going to the convention downtown.”

Her father frowned. “Downtown is not a safe place for young girls. Dangerous pedestrians, opportunistic parking lots, malicious puppies, and traffic is always bad on the highway. Maybe you should livestream instead?”

Her father’s anxiety was legendary in the Syed family. Maybe she could use this to her advantage now.

“You should tell that to Mom and Haleema,” she suggested. “They’re both insisting I attend. You know I would much rather stay home with you, Waqas, and Jamal.”

A look of alarm crossed her father’s face at the mention of Haleema. “As long as your friend is driving,” he said.

Drat. Everyone was afraid of Haleema.

“What about the opportunistic parking lots?” Nada asked. “The malicious puppies?”

He patted her hand absently and shuffled to the kitchen in search of chai. Reluctantly, Nada hefted her overnight bag and followed him.

Downstairs, Haleema and Narjis were enthusiastically discussing wedding details as Nada rejoined them. Haleema glanced approvingly at Nada’s outfit change.

Although Nada knew that Zayn’s family ran the largest Muslim convention in Canada, his role was a bit murky. Haleema had described him as the general manager and once as the CEO.

“Actually, Zayn is an artist,” Haleema now confided to Narjis. A risky move, in Nada’s opinion—her mother didn’t approve of any profession she couldn’t find on the Aunty Pyramid of Eligible Careers: doctor, lawyer, engineer, accountant, or IT professional, in descending order of respectability.

“He paints?” Narjis asked, smile fixed. “So good for men to have hobbies, *nah*? Otherwise, they are always hanging about.”

Nada hid her smile behind a sip of the cardamom-spiced chai her mother had left for her at the wrought-iron kitchen table.

“No, he’s the lead singer of The Companions,” Haleema said proudly, but Narjis only looked blank. “They’re a famous Muslim band? Their first

album, *99 Ways to Love*, even got a write-up in the local paper, and their first tour a few years ago sold out.”

Privately, Nada wondered if this was true. She had done some light snooping after Haleema had announced her engagement, and while Zayn had a professional-looking website and enthusiastic fans on social media, she doubted the market for Muslim spiritual music in North America was large. Her mother, despite her prejudice against any arts-adjacent career, likely had it right: Zayn worked with his parents running the convention, and made mildly popular music on the side.

“We’re going to get stuck in traffic,” Nada said, now anxious to get on the road. She was very aware that any conversation involving weddings and employed men would inevitably lead back to her lack of either. The other women ignored her. Haleema was busy snacking on samosas and Indian *mithai* arranged on her mother’s good plates.

“In any event, I am glad you have convinced Nada to attend the matrimonial speed-dating event,” Narjis said now. “She has put off marriage for too long. She is the last single woman among her friends and she is almost *thirty years old*.”

“At which point I’ll be voted off the island,” Nada added agreeably, and shot Haleema another glare. This was the first time she was hearing about her alleged participation in the matrimonial speed-dating event.

Narjis ignored her daughter. “There is a time and a place for everything, don’t you agree?” she said to Haleema. “You can’t leave marriage too late. Otherwise, women grow set in their ways. The problem is that Nada is too picky.”

Haleema, ever the loyal friend, interjected. “Nada will marry when she’s ready, Aunty. She has excellent judgment and has never rushed into anything in her life. She has her engineering job, she has her family and friends, and for now, that’s enough. When the time is right, she will find her match. Inshallah.”

Nobody could argue against Inshallah—“God willing.” Nada appreciated the subtle reminder that the future was out of their hands, but felt uneasy with the rest of her friend’s pronouncement. Was this how Haleema saw

her? A woman with no agency. A staid, timid singleton too set in her ways to ever take a chance. Someone who waited for the vagaries of fate or an unseen hand to land the perfect partner in her lap, or preferably, in her father's study, asking for his daughter's hand.

Even more appalling was that her mother and best friend seemed to think that Nada was content. She must be a better actor than she thought. Then again, as the middle child in her family, her role was clear: make no waves, cause no fuss. So what if her heart was filled with regret?

Seeking a distraction from these uncomfortable reminders, she spotted a felt box on the counter and reached for it. "What's this?" Nada asked.

Her mother glanced at her father while he refilled his mug with chai from the simmering pot on the stove, before shrugging. "Some of my old gold jewelry. I'm taking it to be cleaned, to have it ready for when you marry. I will expect a full report after the convention."

Nada carefully tipped the jewelry out into her hands. Looking over Nada's shoulder, Haleema cooed at the treasure trove of bright yellow gold. It seemed polished enough to Nada, but she didn't have her mother's exacting eye.

This wasn't a few odd items; it was the bulk of her mother's collection, gifted and curated from her days as a young bride nearly forty years ago: floral *jhumka* ear bobs, heavy gold bangles studded with semiprecious stones, long chains with pendants, and several bridal sets with precious stones. This box contained tens of thousands of dollars' worth of twenty-two karat gold. Narjis seemed wistful as she watched her daughter handle the pieces, and on impulse removed a small chain familiar to Nada. The pendant had her name in cursive.

"I had this made when you were born. You never wear it anymore," Narjis said, before tenderly packing up the jewelry.

Nada fastened the necklace around her neck and rose, quietly thanking her mother for the chai. Even though she usually preferred coffee, she was convinced that her mother's homemade chai had magical qualities. "I'll keep an eye out for any suitable, single Muslim men at the convention," she promised, not really meaning it but wanting to make her mother happy.

Narjis nodded but didn't say anything else. It was a veritable truce and a sign that it was time to go. They had collectively consumed a half-dozen samosas, three *chum chum*, and two *gulab jamun*, along with the cardamom chai. If they didn't leave now, her mother would pull out the lunch menu. As much as Nada dreaded Deen&Dunya, delaying the inevitable was worse.

As if reading Nada's mind, Haleema smiled prettily at Narjis and uttered the only sentence that could free them now: "Thank you so much for the delicious snacks and chai, Aunty. Did I mention that Zayn has a younger brother who is single? He will be at the convention too."

Even though Nada's stomach lurched at her friend's words, they were effective: the women were on the road and speeding toward the highway in five minutes flat.

In the car, Haleema broke the silence. "I know why you didn't want to come to the convention," she said, eyes fixed on the inevitable 401 traffic.

Beside her, Nada held her breath. Was this it? Would she finally be forced to come clean about her reluctance to meet Zayn?

"Why is that?" Nada asked casually.

"I saw the program. I know Sister Rusul is one of the speakers at the convention, and Haneef will be there too."

Now the lurching in her stomach became a wave of nausea. She hadn't experienced car sickness since she was a young girl. Nada closed her eyes. "Did you really sign me up for matrimonial speed-dating?" she asked, hoping to distract her friend.

"Nice try. Anything new with Ask Apa?" Haleema asked, and Nada's heart twisted painfully.

Ask Apa was Nada's first, and only, business—the culmination of her dream to become a techpreneur. A dream her mother's best friend, Sister Rusul, herself a business owner, had encouraged. *Apa* was Urdu for "big sister," and Nada had conceived of the idea in undergrad, when she had few mentors who understood her dreams and struggles as a second-generation South Asian Muslim woman. What she had needed was an *apa*, a wise older sister to give her good advice. Ask Apa was born—a community-focused

app that would allow users to get advice from a culturally sensitive search engine. Nada had seen the potential in microtargeting years before it had become fashionable.

Except her app, and business, had failed spectacularly.

“Nothing is happening with it. The app was dead on arrival,” Nada said, and she knew how bitter she sounded. She had invested nearly two years in the app. She had borrowed money, worked closely with Sister Rusul on her business plan, toiled day and night, right out of undergrad. She had even had business cards made up: *Nada Syed, Ask Apa CEO*. The thought of them neatly stacked inside her closet made her want to cry.

“I always thought it was a great idea,” Haleema said, her tone firm. “If that jerk Haneef’s Ukhti app hadn’t launched six months before yours—”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Nada said. Whenever she thought about the wildly successful Ukhti app—Arabic for “sister”—she was filled with shame. That chapter in her life had been devastating and was inexorably linked with Sister Rusul and her son, Haneef, Nada’s forever-nemesis.

“You’re in a rut, and you hate your job,” Haleema said, interrupting Nada’s gloomy thoughts with her characteristic bluntness.

“I’m a junior solutions architect,” Nada said. “It pays well. I just got a promotion last month. It makes my parents happy.”

“I think you’re scared to move on from what happened,” Haleema said. “But I got you. If we spot Sister Rusul or her slimy snake of a son, we’ll throw halal gummy bears at them. Nobody hurts my girl and gets away with it.”

Nada felt a sudden rush of affection for her friend. Haleema was half Pakistani, half Egyptian, and blessed with smooth tan skin and large hazel-green eyes that gave her small, triangular face an elfin look. She stood at a petite five foot two, and her hijab was always fashionably styled. They had first met at the Muslim Student Association during Nada’s first year of university and had become fast friends, though Haleema was two years older. They were both studying engineering and spent a lot of time panicking over assignments and exams. Haleema in turn had introduced

Nada to the group of Muslim women she still hung out with today. Since graduation, they had all gotten married; a few even had babies now.

When Haleema turned thirty last year, she started to panic at her single status, even going so far as to ask her estranged parents for help finding a husband. Her parents had worked their Canadian contacts, and by spring Haleema had been introduced to, fallen for, and agreed to marry Zayn Haq, convention entrepreneur and allegedly famous community musician.

Nada picked up her friend's phone and examined the picture that graced the home screen. Zayn was a good-looking man with deep-set hazel eyes, a square jaw dusted with stubble, and thick black hair that flopped attractively over his forehead. He smiled cockily at the camera, one eyebrow half-raised in challenge, a knowing look in his eye. He was a bit too pretty for her taste, but her friend seemed happy. He looked so different from his brother. She put the phone away and opened the windows to get some fresh air.

They zoomed past the familiar outlines of the CN Tower and the Rogers Centre stadium, where the Blue Jays played, the wind making Nada's hijab flap around wildly.

"Maybe I am a little nervous to attend the convention," Nada admitted in a small voice, her nerves playing an entire orchestra in her stomach.

Haleema threw her a wide smile. "You're going to love Zayn. And I can't wait to introduce you to his brother. Forget about everyone else. They don't matter."

Nada had tried forgetting. She had buried her secrets and regrets in a small bundle she kept hidden in a floral hatbox inside her closet. It hadn't helped; even years later, they kept bubbling to the surface, magma that threatened to erupt in a dramatic volcanic explosion, obscuring her emotional atmosphere and making progress impossible.

She had prayed for a sign. She had been patient. She had tried, again and again, to move on, to forget. Nothing had worked. Now fate had set its sights on her at last. In a way, this moment was inevitable. More importantly, Nada was tired of running.

They pulled up to the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, and Nada stepped out, ready for whatever came next.