

A photograph of a garage sale scene. In the foreground, a large, dark grey silhouette of a person stands with their back to the camera, looking towards a sign. The sign is white with a red border and contains the text 'GARAGE SALE' in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters, and 'DIAMONDS' in smaller, black, serif capital letters below it. In the background, various items are visible: a pink doll in a pink hijab and yellow dress sits on a white chair; a brown teddy bear with a red bow sits on a wooden table; a blue toy truck is on the floor; and a red and green tricycle is partially visible in the lower left. The background is filled with boxes and other household items, suggesting a cluttered garage or basement sale.

# GARAGE SALE

DIAMONDS

GARAGE SALE MYSTERY SERIES  
SUZI WEINERT

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

## DEDICATION

To my children:  
Mike, Wendy, Greg, Brad and Sally,  
and husband, Don, the wind beneath my wings.



## LETTER TO MY READERS

**T**errorism is not new. My story's about Middle-Eastern terrorism, but historically this tool has served conquerors, militias, governments, religions and Mafia-like organizations. The contest between power via intimidation and freedom to cooperate voluntarily continues in the 9/11 era.

My book is fiction but terrorism is real, affecting citizens of every nation. For open societies like ours, peaceful coexistence vs. the need for safety requires constant vigilance. Live-and-let-live philosophy works where groups live in relative harmony, not attempting to destroy one another.

With the remarkable technology of modern warfare, no person or place is safe from harm. Any nation's capital is a strategic target for attacks, so people living near Washington, D.C. recognize their particular vulnerability. Just such a suburb is McLean, Virginia.

All countries, cultures, societies and religions incorporate the full range of human behavior: kind or cruel, war-like or peace-loving, close-minded or open-minded, progressive or regressive and so on. Education and economics affect the global family. Rights of individuals vs. collectives continue to challenge the brightest minds. Since we all share the same planet, survival of mankind may rest on designing ways to live harmoniously on spaceship earth.

Thank you for reading my book. E-mail me if you like at [Suzi@GarageSaleStalker.com](mailto:Suzi@GarageSaleStalker.com)

~Suzi Weinert



## PROLOGUE - PART A

Hearing insistent knocking on the front door of their dwelling in a remote Middle Eastern village, Ahmed obeyed his father's hand signal pointing the child to hurry upstairs. The boy scampered to the top step, pressed himself against the wall and peeked at the scene below.

Their heavy pounding unanswered, the intruders escalated to boot kicks and shoulder thuds against the wood to bash down the door. With triumphant snarls, four men burst into the home. Already on his feet, Ahmed's father lurched forward to protest their invasion; but they muscled him into a corner, punched him to the floor and took turns delivering vicious kicks to the helpless man's torso. Then one dragged Ahmed's father to a chair to prop his bleeding body upright.

The five-year-old cowered at the top of the stairs, staring open-mouthed at the horror below. An ear-shattering BANG echoed around the room. The child watched red and gray explode onto the wall behind his father. When the men stood back, the child saw a faceless man dressed in his father's clothes sprawled at the base of the wall beneath the dripping splatter. The men grunted and gestured among themselves. One pointed toward the foot of the stairs.

But Ahmed had already sprinted into the bedroom where his mother's eyes peered at him from her tear-streaked face above the infant she held against her heart.

Wide-eyed with terror, he whispered, "The men who hurt Baba are coming for us." Heavy footsteps thumped on the stairs as the boy spoke.

His mother reached a quick decision and moved faster than he'd ever remembered. In one swift, continuous motion she lay the baby on the floor, closed and locked the bedroom door, grabbed Ahmed's arm and flung him into the wardrobe. He heard her turn the key to lock it.

The sounds of the men knocking down the bedroom door penetrated the darkness where the terrified child shrank against the back of the dark armoire. He heard his mother talk to the men, then whimper as she begged them to spare her baby. The infant's hysterical cries stopped mid-wail. Ahmed's mother screamed.

He heard scuffling and the men shouting among themselves followed by a crude laugh. His mother's anguished voice rose decibels higher. "No, please!" she cried. The scrambling and grunting intensified as his mother's screams filled the air. Those screams changed to horrific shrieks of agony, sounds he'd never heard her make but knew came from her mouth because her voice was as familiar to him as his own. Ahmed heard her gagging, coughing and sobbing while the men laughed. Then one man shouted a command in a language he didn't understand. More scuffling. His mother's final scream halted as abruptly as the baby's had.

The boy heard another harsh command from the same man's voice. Then their shoes shuffled across the room, grew fainter and disappeared in footfalls descending the stairs. Then silence.

Paralyzed with fear, he pressed himself into a corner of the cupboard's inky blackness. But as the unbroken silence stretched on, he finally sat up, pressed an ear against the doors and listened with great care.

"Ummi?" he risked calling his mommy. No response. "*Ummi?*" he called louder. Silence.

He pushed his small hands tentatively against the wardrobe's doors. They wouldn't budge. Would his mother turn the key to let him out? Could she if she were hurt? How long should he wait?

Listening again but hearing no sound, he touched a foot against one of the wardrobe's two doors and pressed, jostling it a little. He listened again, heard only silence and pushed harder, this time with both feet. A thin vertical crack of light appeared where the double doors joined in the middle, but the lock's resistance held them. He listened again for any noise from the room. Nothing! Squaring his back against the rear of the wardrobe, he bent his knees and pushed with his feet as hard as he could. With a creak of wood and metal, the doors popped open.

The sight before him stunned Ahmed. His baby sister lay still in a circle of blood near the door, her eyes open but unblinking. His mother

slumped across the bed's edge. Blood stained her clothing, pushed askew. Her bare legs stuck out from her twisted skirt.

He gazed open-mouthed, stupefied by the ghastly scene. What did it mean? His parents always explained unusual events, for he was only a boy. But unless they woke up...

Hearing no sound from downstairs, he eased himself out of the wardrobe and touched his mother.

"Ummi?" His small hand gently shook her shoulder. "*Ummi?*"

She moaned, feebly lifting the fingers of one hand. With difficulty, she opened her green eyes.

"Ummi," he urged. "How can I help?"

She moaned again. "The...baby?"

Ahmed looked at his tiny sister. "She...she doesn't move. Maybe she's resting."

His mother's eyes closed, pain and despair distorting her usually cheerful face. She struggled to form words.

"Your path...difficult. Allah...will guide you," she whispered hoarsely. "Seek...truth. Use...your mind to...sift what you see and hear. Think for yourself. Listen to your heart." A long pause. "Take care of Amina."

In the craziness, he'd forgotten his twin sister. Cousins from a neighboring village had picked her up only this morning to visit with their young daughters for a few days.

"Yes, Ummi," he answered obediently. "But...I don't know where to find her."

His mother gazed deep into his eyes. "Take care of her. And...avenge our undeserved deaths."

"Yes, Ummi. But how?"

"You will... know what to do when... the time comes. Kiss me... good-bye."

He pressed his warm lips against her cheek, exactly as he had kissed her so many times. He pulled back, but the usual loving smile he expected wasn't forthcoming. He buried his face against the familiar cloth of her garment, clasping her in a desperate hug, his little arms stretching around her as far as they could reach. At last he pulled back to look again into her loving eyes gazing deeply into his own, locking him in wordless communication forever connecting mother and beloved son. One moment he saw his image reflected in her moist pupils. The next moment their clarity blurred as her dying eyes unfocused, fading into a vacant stare.

"UMMI!" he screamed, first nudging her to wake up and then urgently shaking her. Instead, she slipped from the bed to the floor and lay in a lifeless, crumpled heap.

His anguished sobs of loss and fear lasted until dark, when at last he crawled back to the earlier safety of the wardrobe, closed the doors and began a fitful night's sleep. The following morning he again tried to wake his mother and baby sister, but even a five year old realized something irreversible had happened. He crept across the grisly bedroom scene, down the stairs, past the faceless thing dressed in his father's clothes and into the kitchen to find some food.

When Amina's visit ended in a few days, wouldn't the cousins bring her back? Wouldn't they explain what happened?

## PROLOGUE - PART B

Two strange men arrived the next morning as Ahmed sat on the cooking hearth, gnawing a piece of bread. Forcing the resisting child to accompany them, the older one explained to the younger one, "When our cleansing team punishes troublemakers like this, we usually find the orphans in the kitchen. Hunger is stronger than fear." Older gave a mirthless laugh.

Younger politely emulated the laugh but with a nervous edge.

"You who I train," Older said to Younger, "do you see how we attack the snake four ways?"

"Four ways, Teacher?" asked Younger with respect. If this were another test, failure to answer correctly meant consequences.

Satisfied at this deference, Older continued. "First, we forever silence the snake's slander against our glorification of Allah, blessed be His name. Second, we take the snake's children to further *our* cause, not theirs—to become human swords for our crusade against all heretics here and in other lands. Third, this snake's punishment frightens the other villagers enough to look away and make no trouble for us now or in the future. Fourth, our cleansing team returns to bury the bodies before confiscating the snake's house and belongings."

"Ah...yes, now I do see, Wise One. But how do you explain to the children the murder of their parents, perhaps witnessed by their own eyes?"

Younger registered alarm at Older's initial menacing look but sighed with welcome relief when his teacher's disapproval changed to a smug

response. "We tell them agents of the American Satan or the evil Jews committed this act. We say we rescued the children from those vicious enemies, the Unbelievers of the one true faith. We say we will teach these children the skills to deliver the vengeance due those enemies who destroyed their family."

"And now we take this new 'recruit' to meet his destiny?" Younger asked.

"You learn fast," Older said with approval. "Yes, at the madrassa boys receive intense religious instruction. When old enough, they learn fighting at the training camps."

"And the girls?"

"They have a different future."

"Different?" asked Younger.

But Older ignored his question, turning instead to the little boy. "Your name, child?"

"Ahmed," he managed in a frightened whisper.

"Speak up, boy," Older demanded gruffly. He repeated his name a little louder. "And what is this on your neck and shoulder?" Older pointed to a large maroon birthmark.

"Baba says Allah drew this mark on me to show my special importance to him."

Older processed this information uneasily. Allah's signs weren't always easy to understand. He studied the shy boy. Was he in the presence of a child bearing a holy mark or had a father invented this tale to comfort his blemished child?

"So what do you think?" Older asked Younger.

Younger thought fast. "Maybe we should watch the boy to learn more before we decide what his father meant," he suggested.

"But of course," Older agreed with a raspy laugh, hiding his own uncertainty.

\* \* \* \*

Not understanding their words when the men switched to another dialect, Ahmed stumbled along with his right hand clenched in Older's tight grip. Through tears the child looked back at his home, reaching his left arm in that direction as if his small grasping fingers could grab and hold forever the memories of his precious life there...precious until yesterday's madness changed everything he knew.

If they took him away, would he ever see his parents or his twin sister again? Staring at his home for the last time, the boy sobbed with such anguish that his steps faltered.

His head snapped back and he choked on his sobs when, cursing with annoyance, Older jerked him hard — toward a future he could not imagine.



**DAY ONE**

**THURSDAY**



## CHAPTER ONE

THURSDAY, 9:31 AM

Jennifer Shannon grinned with triumph as she drove from the estate sale at the sprawling Rotunda condo complex toward her home in McLean, Virginia. Reaching that sale early, she stood third in line when they handed out numbers controlling how many shoppers entered the apartment at one time. Had she really bagged this unlikely treasure? A quick glance at the shiny contents in the shoebox nestled beside her on the passenger seat confirmed she had.

Was that a siren whining in the distance? She turned off the radio and lowered her window an inch to gauge the emergency vehicle's closeness. No, it sounded far away.

As she browsed this morning's estate sale in a spacious apartment, nothing caught her eye until she spotted the very silverware she needed—a stainless steel pattern she started years ago with four packages of eight place-settings, long before Oneida discontinued this Bancroft style.

What happened to all those missing forks and spoons remained a mystery. She'd rescued two from the trash where table-clearing "helpers" mistakenly scraped them along with uneaten food. But could that account for eleven disappearing?

The siren again, a little closer this time.

Only last week Replacements, Ltd, the magic source for discontinued china, silverware and crystal patterns, charged more for these eleven missing forks and spoons than she originally paid for eight place settings many years ago. And now ten place-settings glinted in the box beside

her—fifty pieces for only \$20! Even husband Jason should salute this fortuitous coup!

But that wasn't all. She'd also found the 20-lb exercise weight he'd asked for only yesterday. She filled many requests from family, friends and neighbors who knew about her regular treks to weekend sales, but finding this improbable item so fast beat all odds. Maybe now he'd stop irreverent references to her "garage sale mania."

The siren pierced the air again, triggering an automatic wish for the safety of her five grown children and their families. All lived within a two-hour drive of the McLean home she and Jason bought twenty-five years ago, their proximity to parents seeming a gift in today's mobile society. This nearness allowed frequent family gatherings, which she cherished.

She marveled that a marriage of two such different personalities could last forty-one years, but in the process she and Jason had morphed into a team. At sixty-one, she enjoyed good health, a close family, a loving husband, many friends and a financially comfortable life in upscale McLean. With their child-rearing responsibilities largely behind them, these recent years seemed the best ever. Well, except for her major foible: succumbing to the irresistible weekend lure of garage and estate sales. If Jason grumbled, comparing her "sport" to his golf and tennis brought silence.

She drove into her cul-de-sac, pressed a button to open the iron driveway gates and another to lift the garage door. As she climbed out of her car, the siren whine wafted even closer. Fire? Police? Ambulance? Trouble for someone, she thought, but at least help was on the way.

She shelved newly bought under-the-pillow gifts in a garage cupboard as later surprises for Grands who spent the night. Then she carried her remaining items into the house. As she loaded the sale silverware into the dishwasher to be sanitized, the siren sounded louder. Must be on her side of Dolley Madison Boulevard, the major road cutting through the center of McLean from the George Washington Parkway through Tyson Corner and into Vienna where it became Maple Avenue.

As she pulled clothes from the laundry room dryer, the siren wailed insistently. Was the engine hurtling past her neighborhood?

She stacked the laundry to carry upstairs but the siren's shriek stopped her. Looking out the front door's glass sidelights, she checked for tell-tale smoke somewhere in the neighborhood.

Now deafening, the sound penetrated the walls of her house as it roared into her community and, screaming louder yet, arrived on her street!

Was her house on fire? With a gasp she jerked open the basement door, sniffing for burn odors. She dashed through the house, fearing the acrid smell or billow of smoke. Detecting neither, she rushed out the front door. Covering her ears at the siren's shrillness, she stared open-mouthed at the sleek red-cream-and-silver fire truck and EMS ambulance circling the cul-de-sac in front of her house. They parked opposite her. The piercing siren stopped. Four firefighters poured from the big truck and two from the ambulance, disappearing around the other side of the engine.

After a final anxious glance to assure her own home wasn't in flames, she peered nervously at neighbors' houses around the circle and as far down the road as she could see. No smoke or flames. What was going on? She ran outside and skirted around the truck to find out.

## CHAPTER TWO

THURSDAY, 9:46 AM

The firefighters strode straight to the Donnegan house directly across the circle. She and Jason had known Kirsten and Tony Donnegan for at least twenty years. Their children grew up together, they shared family camping trips, the men went deer hunting each year and the two couples dined often at local restaurants. A practicing veterinarian, Tony was the kindly go-to person for neighborhood kids who found injured or orphaned animals.

What had *happened* here? Maybe a false alarm like the time their son burned microwave popcorn? The smoke had triggered their security system's fire alarm, alerting the fire department. The big engine had pulled into the cul-de-sac that day just as now. Those fire fighters had insisted on coming inside to assure themselves popcorn was the only smoke issue. Bless 'em.

Jennifer paused on the sidewalk. Her police detective son-in-law had warned their family that bystanders and gawkers often interfered with professional emergency work. But if her good friends had a problem, shouldn't she offer help? She raced across the Donnegans' yard to their front door.

Speaking to the first uniformed man she saw inside the doorway, she said, "I'm the Donnegans' neighbor and good friend from across the street. May I...?"

The fire fighter hesitated, but Tony saw her and called, "Jennifer, thank God you're here. Come in quick." She rushed to his side and he

gripped her in a desperate hug. "It's Kirsten. She can't breathe." Jennifer's eyes followed his pointing finger to her friend lying on the floor. Kirsten's face looked ashen as several medics tried to revive her. One attached a heart monitor and took her blood pressure. Another listened to her lungs before starting an IV. Each reported aloud to a third man who stood aside, writing on a clipboard and giving periodic instructions.

Tony clutched Jennifer as the lead medic asked, "Sir, have you a list of her medications?" Tony's bewildered expression showed he did not.

Jennifer answered. "Yes, in her wallet. She and I each keep a list there. Where's her purse?"

Tony shrugged. He seemed confused. "I...I have no idea."

"Then I'll look." Jennifer found the purse in the kitchen, hurried to the living room and gave it to Tony. He fumbled inside before handing it back to her.

"Jen, could you please find it for them?" he asked in a thin voice. He turned to answer more questions from the lead medic.

"Please describe her symptoms."

"She felt tired the last few days and today woke up weak. When she finally came down for breakfast, she looked pale and said she felt clammy and cold. So I bundled her up here on the couch. When her chest hurt and she couldn't breathe, I..." his voice caught, "I called 911."

"Has she a history of heart trouble?"

"High blood pressure but controlled with medication. Isn't it on the list Jen gave you?"

A medic kneeling beside Kirsten said to the lead provider. "Uh-oh, she's going into V-fib."

"Start CPR," the lead medic directed, triggering a flurry of treatment activity. The one who identified ventricular fibrillation began CPR. A second medic applied two hand-sized stickers with wires attached to the heart monitor and injected epinephrine. "Prepare to shock."

"Step away from the patient," the lead medic warned. "The electric current could transfer the same cardiac shock to anyone touching the patient."

Tony clutched Jennifer as the shock jolted his wife's heart. The monitor recorded several audible beeps before the sound changed to an even tone.

"Asystole?" the lead medic asked and got a positive nod from the other techs. The lead radioed Dispatch. "This is now a CPR call. We're going to Fairfax ER."

One technician continued administering CPR, stopping compressions for only a few seconds as they placed Kirsten on the collapsible stretcher.

Tony cried out, "Is she going to be all right?"

The lead medic touched his arm to calm him. "The hospital is equipped for the care she needs right now, so we're taking her there."

"Can I ride with her?"

"Sorry, Sir, we don't have room. But we'll give your wife our best professional care, and Fairfax Hospital's ER is the only level-one trauma center in northern Virginia. She'll be in good hands."

"I can drive you to the emergency room, Tony," Jennifer offered.

This quieted him, as did the apparent reassurance of Jennifer holding his hand tightly. "All right."

"By the way, I'm Lt. Sommer. A captain who's the EMS Supervisor may come by later to talk with you or he may send a policeman to gather all the facts."

Tony frowned, "Why...why police involvement?"

"Just routine, Sir. Don't be surprised if you see one or both of them."

Jennifer hurried across the circle to get her car as Tony watched the crew wheel the stretcher to the ambulance and collect their equipment. She stopped behind the ambulance. Tony climbed in.

The ambulance pulled out first, lights flashing, siren shrieking. The fire truck's powerful motor revved to life, preparing to return to the McLean station house. Jennifer followed closely as the ambulance swept through the neighborhood, but when it hurtled through a red light at the first intersection, she knew she couldn't keep up. Though she drove in the same direction as fast as she safely could, the shrill siren gradually faded and evaporated as if it hadn't existed at all.

## CHAPTER THREE

THURSDAY, 10:31 AM

**I**n the Middle-East, before his arduous journey began, Ahmed remembered looking up sharply when a skinny, rifle-toting soldier rushed into his tent.

“The Great Leader wants you, *now*.” Such commands required instant response. Anxiety gripped Ahmed as he grabbed his weapon and hurried to the big tent. Little good could come from this.

“Permission to enter, Great Leader?”

“Come in, Ahmed.”

Complying, he stepped in upon the worn Oriental carpet and stood at attention before a tall, thin bearded man with steely eyes.

“At ease, Ahmed,” the leader said as the soldier before him tried to imagine what rule he’d unintentionally broken. “How would you like to command a secret operation in the United States?”

Ahmed hoped his jaw hadn’t dropped open in surprise. “It is an honor that you even consider me for such a mission, Great Leader.”

“Your excellent martial skills, quick mind, unquestioned devotion to our cause and obedient submission to Allah, peace be unto His name, have not gone unnoticed. I think these qualities qualify you as the operative for this critical assignment. I chose you among others similarly adept because of my faith in your abilities plus your allegiance to me personally. Don’t disappoint me.”

“I offer my energy and my life to you and our cause, Great Leader.”

"Well spoken, Ahmed. Facilitators along your journey will move you from this camp to a destination in the United States where you will lead a cell of men in an explosive event to terrorize the Great Satan's world. You and those other men will sacrifice your bodies, but your martyred names will touch all Muslim lips and assure your direct path into Paradise."

"I thank you and my ancestors thank you for this great honor to our humble name."

"Besides my detailed instructions, you must prepare to improvise if rocks block the path of your intended plans. You've demonstrated ability to invent new solutions while keeping your eye on the goal, leading us to believe you can handle this situation, however it unfolds. Life doesn't always follow our plans and, in the end, the only one truly in charge of what happens is Allah, bless His name."

"As always, Great Leader, you speak truth and wisdom."

"Good. Now here's what you will do..."

## CHAPTER FOUR

THURSDAY, 10:41 AM

As the fire/rescue ambulance sped toward INOVA Fairfax Hospital, lead medic Lt. Nathan Sommer watched his team take turns administering CPR to an unresponsive Kirsten Donnegan. The EKG attached to her emitted a flat green line. Sommer knew bringing a patient back from this stage was next to impossible. He counted on CPR coaxing enough oxygenated blood to her brain to keep her alive until the hospital ER could attempt to restart her heart.

"Heads up," the driver announced; "five minutes out. You might want to call the ER."

"Thanks." Sommer dialed the hospital ER on his cell phone. The five-out call gave ER staff three time-saving pieces of information: treatment thus far given by EMS, update of the patient's current condition and their imminent arrival at the hospital.

When the ambulance raced up to the hospital's emergency entrance, Sommer jumped out to accompany Kirsten as other professionals arrived to rush her gurney inside. While the rest of his team stayed in their vehicle parked close by, he wouldn't give up, pumping her chest as the gurney rolled until ER personnel took over.

Inside the hospital he watched the Code Team take over and leap into action: intubation, IV drugs and continued CPR. A smile crossed Sommer's face when he heard the heart monitor begin to beep. The beeps rallied, sounding as if she'd make it. But then the steady beeps straggled unevenly and soon evolved into a monotone buzz. This dreaded sound, indicating flat-line pulmonary activity, launched more frantic measures to activate her heart...but without success.

At last, the attending physician stood back. He sighed, dejected at losing this battle. "Note the time of death," he said to a nurse in a barely audible exhale.

Sommer stood transfixed. Despite their training, modern equipment and his team's heroic efforts, their patient was gone. He knew they weren't to blame, but it always hurt and he was a poor loser.

He thought about what had transpired in this case. EMS never left a dying or newly deceased person at the incident location, in this case, Kirsten's house. They transported the patient to the nearest hospital ER. Important reasons justified this. They saved their share, but when they didn't, this action spared the family the traumatic moment of death. Also hospital staff could make the patient presentable before the family came to grieve. On-call grief counselors could assist, if needed.

But there was more. The ER doctor's staff could call the patient's personal physician to determine whether a death appeared natural. If so, the patient's doctor signed the death certificate. If not, they requested autopsy. For heart attacks absent heart-disease history, as in today's case, the radio dispatch Sommer made earlier to his headquarters would alert the EMS supervisor to consider sending a policeman to interview the family and neighbors.

As lead medic, Sommer felt responsibility for the outcome because he ran the calls. His years of experience and refresher training enabled him to quickly evaluate the big picture in each situation. He directed the unfolding second-to-second patient emergency, giving calm orders to the other techs. Every emergency call needed one person in charge to coordinate the team. His job: make quick but correct decisions, coordinate efficiency and move fast. Time was never on his side. He needed to stay hands-off to direct the call and record developments. For Sommer, letting other techs do the work was the hardest part. If the run was shorthanded, he relished the occasional chance to pitch in hands-on to save a life.

Sommer walked out of the ER toward the ambulance. He hated telling his crew their patient died. Sure, on the drive back to the station they would critique what took place. They always did, searching for insights from this experience to improve the next run. Today's by-the-book performance delivered their patient to the ER alive, suggesting a job well done. But as seen-it-all surgeons sometimes phrased it, "The operation was a success but the patient died."

He tried—his whole team tried—to leave disappointment at work when they went home. But the job rolled on... The sheer urgency of attempting to save lives during the next five calls would overshadow the memory of this loss and reset their resolve until the next successful rescue rebalanced the scale.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THURSDAY, 10:57 AM

Jennifer comforted Tony at the hospital when they learned Kirsten's fate. Surprised that he seemed to handle this devastating situation better than she could, she dried her tears to phone Jason, explain the situation and ask him to meet them there. When he arrived at the ER, he found the two of them sitting, shoulders hunched, in a hospital room where Kirsten's body lay in a bed next to their chairs. Jason put a sympathetic hand on Tony's shoulder.

"She's gone, Jay..."

"We're here to help any way we can. Have you told your children?"

"Not yet..."

"Do you want us to drive you home where you can do that?"

"I guess that makes sense," Tony agreed.

"Jen, shall we both drive Tony home in my car and come back later for yours?"

"Absolutely."

Ten minutes later Jason drove while Jennifer sat with Tony in the back seat. She caressed his hand to comfort him and lend him her strength. Though silent, he seemed grateful. Tears dampened his face as he gave her what seemed grief-stricken looks but, except for a few ragged sighs, he controlled his emotions and squeezed her hand.

Jason noticed Adam Iverson's unmarked police car in front of Donnegans' house.

"That's right," Tony recalled, "the lieutenant said a supervisor or policeman might come by. Glad it's your son-in-law Adam."

"Hello, Sir." Adam shook Tony's hand. "I'm very sorry to hear about your loss."

"Thank you, Adam. When Kirsten and I attended your wedding a few months ago, I didn't imagine I'd see you next under these bizarre circumstances."

"Right, Sir. I know this timing isn't good, but could we talk for a few minutes about what happened so I can fill out a report?"

Tony frowned, contemplating him a long minute before deciding. "Sure, Adam. Come on inside. Your parents and I were about to call my kids. This won't take long, will it?"

"No, Sir, it won't," Adam assured as the two of them walked toward the Donnegan house.

Jason called after them, "Tony, when you finish, let us know if we can help."

When the Shannons entered their house, Jennifer hurried to answer the ringing phone.

"Hi, Mom. It's Hannah."

"Hello, Honey. What a nice surprise to hear from the little bride. Everything okay?"

"Oh, yes. Everything's wonderful. Sorry not to call oftener, but Adam and I are still so wrapped up in each other we haven't made much time for the other people we love."

"Not to worry. We all understand. But I'm afraid we have some bad news. Kirsten Donnegan collapsed and died this morning. We just saw Adam, who's across the street for a police report."

"Oh, Mom, I've known her since I was little. What a blow for their whole family. Was she sick?"

"No, very sudden and unexpected."

"How awful. I called to see if you and I could have lunch today. Are you up for that, given the situation? We could talk and you could fill me in about what happened to Mrs. D."

"Hang on a minute, Hannah." she turned to Jason. "Could you take the afternoon to help Tony but drop me at the restaurant beforehand so Hannah can take me by the hospital later to get my car?" He nodded. "Okay, lunch sounds great. How about Pulcinella at 12:30 if you don't mind dropping me by Fairfax Hospital afterward to pick up my car?"

"Glad to, Mom, and you picked a favorite restaurant. Just like old times. See you there."

"I'll make a reservation in case they're extra busy today. Love you, Sweetie."

*"Love you, too, Mom."*

Jennifer glanced at her watch. If she hurried she could dress quickly, meet her daughter on time, get her car and multi-task several errands afterward, including buying ingredients for the casserole dinner.

## CHAPTER SIX

THURSDAY, NOON

When Jason returned from dropping Jennifer at Pulcinella, Adam knocked on the Shannons' door. Jason invited him in. "Are you still on duty or would you like a beer?"

"I'm still on but thanks anyway. Post-rescue follow-up isn't my usual job, but I was headed this way anyhow and know the family so I volunteered. If you have a minute, could I ask you the same questions I did the other neighbors?"

"Sure, Adam, but what's this all about anyhow?"

"In cases like this, we try to rule out foul play while the deceased is still at the hospital – whether the death looked suspicious in some way. So, how long have you known the Donnegans?"

Jason did the math. "About twenty-one years."

"And during that time did you witness friction or violence between them?"

"Just the opposite. They're well-liked in the neighborhood and from everything we saw, devoted to their children and each other. He's also a respected member of the community. You probably know he owns a popular veterinary practice."

"That matches accounts from other neighbors. My last stop is Mr. Donnegan's office to talk with his staff. If that checks out, my work here is over."

"Any progress on developing the Yates property?"

Jason recalled walking some of the fifteen acres of valuable farmland located on the McLean/ Great Falls border, land that Adam had inherited

from the Yates estate when he became the only surviving heir. During his first six years of life, when Adam was called Mathis Yates, his parents had abused him and his younger brother, Ruger. Jason understood that Adam's emotional survival of these horrific childhood experiences required him to totally repress those early years.

"That's just what I wanted to speak with you about. We have impressive offers from two developers. We're studying them to make the best choice. Both allow us to subdivide the property but still keep one terrific lot for building our own house.

"Good for you, Adam. Take your time. Choose well."

"Would you give us your opinion about our finalist? We'll also ask my other new dad for his input. With so much at stake, we want to pick the best option."

The "other new dad," Jason knew, referred to lawyer Greg Bromley. Greg's youthful romance thirty-five years earlier with Adam's mother, Wendey, had produced an unwed pregnancy she feared would ruin Greg's budding law career. To protect him, Wendey had eloped in a loveless marriage with Tobias Yates. She'd discovered too late that her husband was an abusive monster who, for years, terrorized her and the two hapless children.

"Of course, we'll share our knowledge and experience," Jason assured him. "I can look at your project as an engineer and Greg can as an attorney."

Adam smiled in gratitude at his new father-in-law. "Thanks, Sir...er, Dad."

"You're welcome, Son." After farewells, Adam left.

I like that young man, Jason thought. He and Hannah make a fine young couple even though each brings some baggage to their relationship. Hannah needs to trust men again after ex-boyfriend Kevin broke her heart with his cheating, and Adam must face his awful childhood trauma if and when it surfaces.

He hoped their marriage would survive whatever lay ahead.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THURSDAY, 12:33 PM

Hannah's reference to "old times" at this restaurant conjured Jennifer's memories of family meals there before their children grew up to lead their own lives. At a Shannon son's wedding rehearsal dinner in the Pulcinella party room, the owner's gifted friend, operatic tenor Antonio Salvatore, had provided the evening's entertainment. Not everyone received such treatment. They were truly blessed.

As Jennifer pushed open the restaurant's heavy front door, one of the owners hurried to greet her.

"Mrs. Shannon, good to see you again! Your daughter is at your favorite table by the windows."

"Thank you, Moe. We're looking forward to a wonderful meal, as usual."

As they approached the table, Hannah jumped up to hug her mother.

"So glad you thought of this, Hannah," Jennifer said as Moe seated her and moved away. "Is our little bride still a happy girl?"

Hannah beamed. "Oh yes, Mom. It's almost embarrassing how much Adam and I are in love."

"Wonderful. So if you're a happy girl, you must want to talk about something else."

"Yes, but first, what happened to Mrs. D this morning?"

Jennifer told her the whole story and they shared dismay at Kirsten's passing.

Finally Jennifer asked, "So why did you suggest lunch together today?"

"You know we live in Adam's bachelor apartment, the one attached to his mother's house. It's private and in a good neighborhood close to downtown McLean, so it offers many advantages. But from the start we thought it temporary until we found our own place."

"Does this mean you're house-hunting?"

"We want to stay in the McLean area. We both grew up here, Adam's police work is here, both our families live here. My last year of college at George Mason is nearby. But what real estate agents call 'upscale, affordable McLean' may be upscale but it isn't affordable, at least for us just starting out. Rents are steep. Buying is out of the question. For our budget, prices are astronomical. So Adam's decided to subdivide and sell some of his inherited property on Winding Trail Road. His new dad, Greg Bromley, helped him start a corporation to offer the land without revealing Adam's name. Developers drool over such prime real estate between McLean and Great Falls. When he sells it, we'll have money to buy or build our own house."

"That makes financial sense."

"True. So we visited the old farm to evaluate the situation. Mom, it's beautiful and peaceful there. Unlike downtown McLean where we live now, it's fresh and open—like countryside. You know how I've loved nature since childhood. This place has unusual birds and wildflowers. At night, away from the lights of town, the sky is filled with stars. We both love the location."

Hannah's obvious excitement touched Jennifer. She remembered early days when she and Jason had viewed the world and their life in it with just such idyllic eyes. Anything you wanted enough and worked together to achieve seemed doable when you combined energies with this incredible person you loved so much. She smiled, encouraging Hannah to continue.

"We talked with a developer who showed us how the fifteen acres could be divided into six two-acre lots and one three-acre. He suggested we keep the bigger piece for building our own house one day. According to him, our three acres and new house would be on the choicest part, which happens to be the site of the old Yates house where Ruger lived as a child."

"Oh?" Jennifer tried to hide sudden discomfort. Was Hannah's failure to mention that Mathis also lived his early years there a glaring oversight?

"Yes, because the land slopes in such a way that if we build near the top we'll have gorgeous views in several directions and good water run-

off. Adam's already knocked down most of those old weathered sheds except for the barn and hen house."

Frightening images of the old house swam into Jennifer's mind. The awful place where many had suffered and she'd expected to die after her capture. With conscious effort, she changed the subject. "After college graduation will you job hunt?"

"Yes, I'd like one in the McLean/Tyson areas so we'll both live close to work. That's part of the new 'green' strategy. Rather than gas-guzzling, time-wasting, environment-polluting killer commutes, my generation hopes to work near home."

"Commendable. So you've prepared a resume?"

"Not yet. My income isn't needed at the moment, and I want time to work on our other plan."

"...your other plan?"

"Mom, we're going to move into the old Yates family house on the property. We'll be on scene to make important decisions about where to build the new house before Adam decides which acreage to sell. We need that clearly in mind before he signs with a developer. Since Adam already owns the land, the price is right. We'd have all the benefits of the McLean and Great Falls communities but could still raise a few chickens, plant a garden and eat organic vegetables we grow ourselves. Control over food quality is important because we think the toxic stuff sprayed on plants and fruit bought in groceries explains a lot of illnesses and diseases. We could create our own special world. We're so excited, Mom. It's a dream we can make come true."

Jennifer felt as if she'd been punched. Her daughter and Adam in that wretched house of horrors day after day, week after week?

Hannah paused her animated chat, fork in midair, to stare at her mother. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"I agree with everything you said about food quality—even though you didn't warn me you were stepping on your soapbox." She tried a nervous laugh then looked directly at her daughter. "I'm just trying to absorb this...this.... You...you're not concerned about living in a place where such dreadful things happened generation after generation?"

"Mom, you of all people don't believe in haunted houses. It's just an inanimate building—walls and a roof—with no control over who lived there or how they behaved. It isn't infected with poison. We'd get rid of *everything* inside, which is right up your alley because we'd want to have a huge garage sale and then refill the house with quality second-hand furniture."

Jennifer drew a sharp breath. Should she share her apprehension with this daughter so focused upon a single course of action? What was her responsibility here? Each person deserved freedom to make decisions and learn from mistakes. But informed decisions stood the better chance of success. Shouldn't a parent try to spare his child pain or danger when possible? The more puzzle pieces Hannah had, the clearer picture she could make.

To avoid Hannah's needing to repent later, shouldn't someone warn her before she plunged ahead?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THURSDAY, 1:07 PM

Looking across the table at her daughter, Jennifer wondered how best to explain her concerns. She composed words in her head then blurted them before she changed her mind. “You’re right, Hannah, a house is an inanimate building. But this isn’t just any old house. It’s where Adam, your husband, endured terrible abuse for the first six years of his life.”

“Good second-hand furniture makes sense since we only expect to stay a few months. You and I could have fun giving a big garage sale to get rid of what’s there and afterward shop together for replacements. Our tastes differ, which is normal for different generations, but you know all the resources, and I can make the selections. And if Adam goes to law school as his new dad suggested, we’d live on my new job’s income until the other acres sell.”

Jennifer stared at her daughter. Had Hannah missed what she said about Adam’s torture at the house or chosen to ignore it? She thought about Ruger’s experience at the farm. Did his similar plan to start a new life there prompt him to comb local garage sales to replace his hated mother’s belongings? If so, his plan didn’t work. Purging the house didn’t purge its horror for him.

How could she share this connection and her resulting uneasiness with Hannah? She reached across the table, touched her daughter’s hand and looked directly into her eyes. “Honey, didn’t Adam tell us repressing those awful childhood memories allowed him to move forward and develop into the balanced person he is? What if living in the house reawakens

those torturous memories? Doesn't 'repressed' mean the experiences still exist, just buried deep in his mind until something jars them out?"

Hannah's gaze dropped to focus on her plate. A tear spilled from the corner of one eye. "Oh, Mom, I don't want anything to threaten our happiness together, especially a risk we take voluntarily. Adam and I talked about this, and he's convinced bad vibes from the past can't change the person he is now. I'm nervous because I don't want anything to hurt someone I love, but he thinks our plan is logical and practical. He thinks country living would be fun and eco-sound. I admit that the idea of using the old house startled me at first, but I'm not the bold visionary he is and, of course, I want to support his ideas. At best, the plan seems like a harmless, quaint way to spend a few months in a beautiful country setting."

"But..."

"...but frankly, Mom, I'm nervous about anything that might threaten our life together."

Moe reappeared. "Dessert for you ladies today?" They shook their heads and Jennifer produced a credit card from her purse.

"Oh, Mom, what should I do?"

"Honey, this is one of those dilemmas life keeps handing out. You make the best decision by learning as much as possible about the situation. Sometimes you get it right, sometimes you don't. If you don't, you try again."

"You're not going to tell me what to do, are you?"

"Of course not, Honey. This is your life. But I'm glad you're not overlooking anything affecting your best choice. And here's an idea that might influence your decision."

Hannah's eyes widened. "What?"

"A house safety inspection. You'd want one if you bought a house. They only cost a few hundred dollars. The inspection checks the electrical system, plumbing, foundation, roof, chimneys, drainage, HVAC and water heater; even radon gas and carbon monoxide. A farm's tests should also include well water and septic tank."

"Adam told me Greg Bromley—I still have a hard time calling him 'Dad'—advised him not to invest in structural repairs since the old house will be torn down for rebuilding. So if it isn't safe, I can't imagine Adam would want us to live there."

"Well, there you go."

"Oh, Mom, thanks. And by the way, guess what?" Hannah flashed her winning smile.

"I give up."

"Adam took me to a shooting range to learn to fire weapons. Police work teaches every person should know how to defend himself, so it's a sensible skill to learn. He thinks isolated living on the fifteen acres means I should know how to protect myself if it's ever necessary. Turns out I'm a pretty good shot with a pistol." She groped in her purse, withdrew and unrolled a target showing a silhouetted human form perforated with holes centered about the head and chest.

Jennifer remembered Hannah as a little girl, holding up her latest proud triumph: a Girl Scout badge, a report card with straight A's, a tennis trophy...and now this.

"Impressive, Hannah. What a many-talented gal you are!"

She grinned at her mother's approval. "Before we go, I almost forgot to ask – any family news?"

Jennifer thought. "Your sister Becca comes home from Virginia Tech for Thanksgiving break on Saturday. She invited Tina McKenzie to join us for the family event on Thursday."

"How's Tina recovering after her awful experience with Ruger Yates?"

"Plastic surgery repaired her outer wounds and counseling's working on her inner ones. I guess we'll learn more when we see her at Thanksgiving."

"And my siblings?"

"Kaela and Owain are about to take a needed business-and-pleasure long weekend get-away. Guess who's babysitting their three kiddos while they're gone?"

"Mom, you're a saint."

"Back to Thanksgiving, Dylan's family and four kiddies are coming as well as Mike and Bethany. And we've invited Adam's mother, Sally Iverson, and his new dad, Greg Bromley. And, of course, we'll extend an invitation to poor Tony Donnegan. How about you and Adam?"

"Absolutely. What can we bring?"

"Appreciate the offer, Honey, but if I shop for one item I might as well get them all. One of these days, I may ask you children to take over, but not yet. Coming home should be a relaxing treat for you with your busy lives."

"Mom, you make coming home something very special." She stood and hugged her mom. "Now, let's go get your car."

They left the restaurant arm in arm.

## CHAPTER NINE

THURSDAY, 2:32 PM

**D**ressed in shabby, filthy clothes, Ahmed accepted exhaustion from the tormenting hardships along the way. He balanced it with the exhilarating thought that he'd reach his final destination *today*.

The difficulties during these past dangerous, miserable months swam through his mind as he recalled how one designated accomplice after another handed him off to the next, moving him invisibly from the Middle-East toward his pre-arranged destination in North America.

Before leaving his country, he'd felt a surprising personal hesitation when the Great Leader ordered him to shave his luxuriant natural beard and crop his hair. He understood the need to disguise identifiable Middle-Eastern characteristics for this mission. Compared to the excruciating training to endure torture if captured, this simple cosmetic gesture was nothing. Yet, relinquishing this cultural sign of masculinity dismayed him even though he admitted sadly that Allah's path for him excluded any expectation of a woman in his life. He needed no handsome beard to signal his maleness.

Still, he needed respect among his male peers with whom the beard showed both his dedication to Allah and his virility. Fortunately, he'd been told to wait until the night before departing on his mission to remove his beard. The further he traveled from his homeland, the less this lack of facial hair set him apart from others.

Instructions to let the beard stubble reappear while he traveled to the U.S.A. created an unkempt-look which, together with his dirty, worn travel clothes, achieved a decrepit appearance signaling potential human

predators this wasn't a man worth harassing. Tolerating the filth served its critical purpose even though Ahmed's religion reinforced his personal preference for cleanliness. He chafed at this disgusting daily desecration, although the ruse served his mission well.

First a series of small boats, then freighters, moved him down waterways from the Gulf of Aden through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. Then a particularly uncomfortable cargo ship tossed him mercilessly for too many days across a stormy Atlantic. He ventured out only at night in seasick desperation from his sequestered, claustrophobic cabin.

At last the vessel entered the Gulf of Mexico, depositing him at a port where others removed him from the ship in a cargo box they conveyed to a warehouse. More facilitators moved him in a series of clunker vehicles across scorching Mexican wasteland. They delivered him to a coyote who prodded him through a rancid, decaying, rat-filled tunnel beneath the U.S. border into Texas.

Once he was delivered inside the Texas line, others picked him up and drove him to a seedy motel where he showered away the travel stench in a cleansing lasting until the shower's cascading hot water ran cold. He winced at again donning the filthy clothes, but with only days to his destination, he had forced himself. Their critical importance to his larger objective meant under no circumstances could he leave these clothes behind. The safest way not to lose them was to wear them.

A variety of trucks and cars drove him for days on end through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas and into Virginia. Every step along the way pointed him toward a certain house in a certain town where he would carry out his destructive mission, and, praise be to Allah, he would reach that destination before this day ended.

When the panel truck in which he rode the last stretch stopped for fuel, he shaved away his beard stubble at the gas station's restroom sink, washed his hair and cleaned his face, neck and armpits with damp paper towels. Later, hidden from view in the back of the panel truck, he changed into clean clothes after carefully placing his worn travel garments in his suitcase.

To prevent this driver from knowing his final destination, the truck dropped him in front of the McLean Safeway store, where he phoned his host to pick him up.

## CHAPTER TEN

THURSDAY, 4:02 PM

Jennifer returned from lunch to find Jason at home. “How’s Tony doing?”

“Rough afternoon. Telling his kids was hard. I overheard their reactions to their mother’s death on the speaker phone. Heart-breaking, Jen! Then we called funeral homes and picked one. He wants a small funeral, family only, but you have to jump through most of the same hoops as if it were public. The funeral director’s a pro, with lists of what needs to happen.”

“Like?”

“Like writing her obituary and deciding which newspapers should print it, asking someone to give a eulogy at the service, picking a casket and selecting a cemetery or columbarium. Then planning the church service, musician and a reception for mourners there afterward. They’ll make a slide show – with today’s technology, it’ll be a Powerpoint – of Kirsten’s life with any photos he gathers. I’ll help him when he and the kids work on that tomorrow. This afternoon at 3:30 we meet his pastor to make church arrangements. What a grim education, Jen. This convinces me we should work out a lot of this in advance so our kids – or whichever one of us is left – won’t need to wade through it while confused and grieving.”

“Okay, it’s on our to-do list. By the way, what’s a columbarium?”

“A place to store a deceased person’s ashes. Tony’s having Kirsten cremated.” At his wife’s stricken expression, he added, “What’s wrong?”

His words stunned her. "But that's impossible. She and I talked about this just a few weeks ago. Neither of us wanted cremation. How could he not know that about his own wife? You know exactly what I want."

"True, because we talked about this when my parents died, but maybe they didn't."

Kirsten's voice echoed in Jennifer's ears: "Burial is definitely my choice. I shudder at the idea of cremation. If you have a preference, Jen, tell Jason now so he'll know what you want. Tony knows exactly how I feel about it."

Surely Tony wouldn't ignore Kirsten's wish unless...unless he had a reason? But what? A crime needed motive, method and opportunity. Sure, spouses had opportunity because they lived together. But absent motive and method, scratch opportunity. Why in the world would Tony want Kirsten dead? Could their behind-the-scenes life differ that much from the façade they presented?

Without a body, Jennifer realized, nobody could investigate external evidence like bruising or internal evidence like poison. EMS techs might not see signs of trauma because they saw Kirsten clothed except for her chest, but hospital ER crews had a full-body view.

Then she chastised herself. What kind of disloyal tangent was this? Both Donnegans were long-time, trusted neighbors and friends.

Jason tapped her on the arm. "Jen, you have that thinking-look, a look that makes me uneasy."

"Jay, he's making a terrible mistake." She picked up the phone. "I need to set him straight."

Jason gently eased the phone from her hand and put an arm around her shoulder. "Honey, it's too late. The funeral home cremated her thirty minutes ago."

A tear spilled onto her cheek. "How could he? Why would he? Something's wrong. She told me they discussed this. He wanted cremation but she didn't. What's going on here, Jay?"

"Look, I don't know the answer. Maybe she thought they discussed it but they didn't? Or she said it but he didn't hear it. Or he's so upset and confused with her sudden death he forgot that conversation? Or he accidentally checked the wrong box on the form at the funeral home? Whatever the explanation, it's over, Jen. There's no undoing it. Should you torture him with recrimination by telling him he made a terrible mistake or should you let it go?"

"Oh, Kirsten, I'm so sorry this happened to you," Jennifer whispered to her departed friend.

"Jen, Kirsten's problems are over. She's gone. Does it matter now what happens to her remains?"

"It's not right. When we make our funeral plans in advance the way you suggested, let's write it all down. Please promise me you'll respect my wishes."

"Honey, you know I will. We trust each other. We love each other. You'll follow my choices and I absolutely promise to follow yours. Now, let's dry those tears and think good thoughts."

She sniffled but changed the subject. "I guess you're right." She busied herself in the kitchen. "By the way, I rushed off early to the estate sale and only scanned the classified ads. Any big news in the morning newspaper?"

"Mainly more terrorism attacks around the world, mostly the Middle-East and Europe this week. At least the powder keg hasn't exploded in the U.S. again since 9/11. McLean's probably one of the safest places around, with the CIA and Homeland Security right here."

He thought a moment before adding silently to himself, or the most dangerous....

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THURSDAY, 4:16 PM

Still uneasy about Kirsten's cremation, Jennifer tried to shift focus. She scanned *The Washington Post* Jason handed her and picked up on his comment about terrorists attacks. "Why don't Muslims follow their religion and just let others do the same?"

"Some do, but it seems to me every religion's fundamentalists concentrate on the word rather than the spirit. In poor, desperate and illiterate populations, the masses are easily guided by whoever interprets holy writings for them. Islam has no corner on that. Fundamentalists tend to be fanatics or extremists, convinced that if they're right, everyone else is wrong. They see a them/us power struggle ending in a mandate to convert or dispose of *them*. Without separation of church and state, religious brainwashing starting with toddlers is reinforced by their churches or mosques, schools, government and social culture. They know nothing else."

He paused, noted his wife was still listening intently—a behavior he counted on—then finished offering his perspective. "For Muslim fundamentalists, even questioning Islam is severely punishable blasphemy. Without exposure to other ideas, their way seems the only way. You're a believer or a non-believer, no in-between categories. And this isn't even original. Remember the Salem witch hunts? Remember the Inquisition?"

"But Jay, you said yourself, Islam isn't *all* radicals. When radicals come to this country, aren't they exposed at last to new ideas? How can they miss other ways of thinking and acting?"

"Don't oversimplify, Jen. Even in the U.S., where citizens can read anything they like, attend any church they wish and question all religions,

many stick with their original religious exposure from the cradle to the grave. Their parents' religious values influence them even if they question them later. Imagine growing up where church and state are combined. To draw a group even closer together it's handy to invent a scapegoat to hate, some guilty person or group who deserve loathing. You see that at work even in sports where the other team's athletes are the 'bad guys.' Right now the Jews, Americans and British fill this need for radical Muslims. Even if we understand how radicals get that way, we can't allow them to murder the opposition to further their cause."

"You're right, Jay. I love how you always think these things through." She changed the subject. "By the way, please tell Tony I'm bringing dinner tonight. I feel so sad for them. When his children go back to their own worlds after the funeral, he'll live all alone in a big empty house. How will he do it? Jay, I can't imagine life without you."

Jason walked over and pulled her into his arms. "Jen," he soothed, "Kirsten would appreciate what a true friend of hers you are to help Tony. You got him through the emergency room ordeal, and you'll watch out for him in the weeks ahead. Of course, you're affected by what's happened; you've been an integral part of it. We both have." He kissed the top of her head. "We have lots of wonderful years ahead of us." He sang a few bars of "Don't worry, be happy" accompanying the lyrics with uncoordinated, off-beat body sways.

His antics made her smile. She hugged him close. "Thanks, Jay, for understanding."

"Hey, isn't that what we do for each other?"

"Do you want me to come along to help plan the church service?"

"No, I think we can handle it. His kids arrive this afternoon, and they want to be together as a family tonight. Speaking of family, what did Hannah want at lunch today?"

"She and Adam are moving into the old Yates house while they subdivide his property." Jennifer explained her concerns and her home-inspection advice.

"Well, they're young and eager..." he said with a far-away look.

"...and idealistic, imagining nothing could change their happiness."

"We can relate to that, can't we?" he chuckled. "Well, maybe not the young part any more..."

She nodded, thinking of Kirsten: warm and lively one minute, cold and dead the next. "We better value each moment and people precious to us. Like you, dear Jay."

He chuckled. "I love you too, Jen. Nobody gets more out of the moments we're on earth than you. You hit the floor running every day."

"Are you up for dinner at Kazan tonight?"

"I'll be more than ready for a pleasant evening by then. Turkish food sounds just right. I hope Zaynel is serving my favorite doner kebab tonight." He looked at his watch. "Well, gotta go get Tony." She waved as he closed the front door behind him.

Jennifer sat still, thinking about their conversation. Her mind wandered back to the Donnigans. Was Tony's decision to cremate Kirsten accidental, as Jason suggested, or deliberate? If deliberate, what could he possibly need to hide?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

THURSDAY, 4:39 PM

A few minutes later Jennifer stepped onto her front porch, waving as Jason and Tony pulled away in her husband's car. She inhaled the warmth of this rare summery November day. Looking across at Donnegans' house, she wondered which of Kirsten's children owned the unfamiliar car parked in his driveway. From years as neighbors, she knew the children. Should she sympathize now or let them marshal energy for the ordeals ahead? She'd wait until she took dinner over later.

Not a thoroughfare, their cul-de-sac drew few cars other than residents', but nice days like this invited foot traffic. A man walked a dog around the circle, saying "hello" as he passed. A child whizzed by on a skateboard. A jogger raised a hand of greeting as he huffed around the sidewalk.

Along the front yard's wrought-iron fence, she spotted several dead, scruffy plants, an eyesore in an otherwise tidy yard. Why not take a few minutes to cut them back? She got garden gloves and plant scissors from the garage and knelt, snipping the spent stalks. Focused on clipping, she jumped when a deep male voice said, "Hello, Jennifer. You seem busy."

She looked up to see a neighbor who lived a few blocks away. He regularly walked this route, and they often chatted over-the-fence when she was outside as he strolled past. They'd exchanged names, as casually-meeting neighbors do. She stood to greet him. "Why, hello, Larry. Thank goodness you happened by. My old bones don't kneel very long any more."

He laughed. "With old bones myself, I sympathize. What a perfect fall day for a walk – so warm, so beautiful. And how are you. Jennifer?"

"I'm well, but do you know the Donnégans across the street?" He did, explaining Tony was their cat's vet. Jennifer told him about Kirsten and he spoke of his own experience with families at his temple who had lost loved ones.

"So you're Jewish?" He nodded. On impulse she said, "Good. Then maybe you could help me better understand this old hatred between Arabs and Jews. Jason and I were talking about it earlier, and I have to admit more ignorance about all this than makes me comfortable."

"I'll help if I can."

Jennifer put down her gloves and shears and leaned against the fence. "The media describe terrorism escalating in the Middle-East, and 'Arab Spring' hasn't turned out the way our country hoped it might. Iran's involved through Hezbollah and they're Persian. If any of them plays a nuclear card, the world's at risk. Do you know how this ancient Arab/Jew feud began?"

"A very weighty subject, but I can tell you what I know."

"Thank you. Shall we sit on the front porch to talk? May I offer cookies, coffee, soda or wine?"

Larry chuckled. "You've made an offer I can't refuse. And I'm not even Italian." They laughed as he settled himself on a porch chair.

"What would you like?"

"A glass of water would be fine," he said.

She returned with water and brownies for them both. Jennifer told him what went through her mind as she'd pruned bushes.

"To outsiders, Arabs and Jews appear more alike than different. They share the same genetic origins in the same part of the world with similar traditions and culture. Both Muslims and Orthodox Jews separate men and women at social or religious gatherings, and the women cover their hair with scarves. Both groups practice circumcision. Neither group eats pork. They share many holy places. Why not brotherly comrades instead of arch enemies?"

Larry gave a wry laugh. "Well, don't forget real brothers often fight. Remember Cain and Abel? But some biblical history might help answer your question. Judaism was well established for several thousand years before Jesus came onto the scene. After that, Muhammad gave birth to Islam in 610 CE in Saudi Arabia. He wrote down religious wisdom he said he received from Allah, the one God. He drew heavily upon Jewish tradition, which he interpreted and modified from Torah stories for use in his Quran. The one-god idea was already a pivotal Jewish concept, though ours wasn't named Allah. One important biblical story Muhammad

changed concerns Abraham, a patriarch acknowledged by both Jews and Muslims, who called him 'Ibrahim.'

"The Holy Scripture describes Abraham as an obedient man of great faith who talked often with God. God told Abraham he would be the father of many nations. This seemed unlikely since he and his wife, Sarah, who Muslims call Sarai, were old, well beyond child-bearing years. But with this prophecy in mind, his barren wife Sarah offered Abraham her Egyptian serving girl, Hagar – Muslims call her Hajar – saying, 'Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.' We might view this now as an ancient surrogate pregnancy."

"Isn't the Abraham story from the Book of Genesis?" Jen asked.

Larry nodded. "Yes. It's the first book of the Torah as well as what Christians call the Old Testament. Hagar, so the story goes, had no choice in this and when she conceived she despised Sarah. Jealous of Hagar even though this was her own idea, Sarah got Abraham's permission to punish her maidservant. When she did, Hagar ran away from her mistress into the wilderness. An angel found her by a stream and asked why she was there. Hagar explained. The angel told her to return to her mistress and submit to punishment, for she would bear eighty-six-year-old Abraham a son and name him Ishmael. The angel said this son's descendants would multiply until there were too many to count. So Hagar returned, took the punishment and bore a son. When Ishmael was thirteen years old, God told Abraham to circumcise all males in his household to show their covenant with God. So, ninety-nine-year-old Abraham followed this instruction, which included himself and his son Ishmael."

"Ouch!" Jennifer cringed. "This must have seemed an extraordinary demand."

"Yes, but Abraham obeyed, as always. Then God told Abraham his wife would bear a son to be named Isaac, so when Ishmael was fourteen years old, Abraham 100 and Sarah ninety, she had her first baby and named him Isaac. They circumcised him at eight-days old, per the covenant with God. When Isaac was weaned, Abraham threw a celebration feast. At this event Sarah noticed Hagar scoffing at this favoring of Isaac over Ishmael. You see, no such party happened for *her* son although born first. Jealous again, Sarah asked Abraham to 'cast out this bondswoman and her son; for the son of this bondswoman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.' Upset about this, Abraham consulted God, who said to go along with Sarah's wishes, for God would make nations from both these sons. So next morning, Abraham gave Hagar food and a skin of water and sent her with Ishmael into the wilderness."

"Not too different from today's soap opera tales, is it?"

"No, but this story isn't over. Hagar wandered the desert of Beersheba until her food and water ran out. Resigned to death, she shaded her dying son under a shrub. She walked away – to avoid seeing him perish – and wept. But God heard her son's cries and sent an angel to Hagar saying God would make a well of water to save and protect the boy for his future. They lived in the wilderness until the boy grew up and eventually married an Egyptian wife Hagar found for him."

"A happy ending, then?"

"Not yet. Before Hagar and Ishmael were kicked out, God tested Abraham's faith with another startling order: to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering to God. Muslims and Jews agree about this event but not about which son he tied down on the sacrificial rock. As Abraham raised his knife to obey God by killing his son before lighting the sacrificial fire, a ram caught his horns in a nearby bush. God said to sacrifice the ram instead of the son. Abraham had again proved his faith. God promised to multiply this son's descendants 'as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.' He added other special blessings. But was this nearly-sacrificed son Isaac, as the Jews record in the Torah, or Ishmael, as Muslims claim in Muhammad's Quran modification?"

"I see the problem. Were these Abraham's only sons?" Jennifer asked.

"He fathered more children, but these two 'first' sons create the schism between Judaism and Islam. Biblical scholars disagree about some ancient writings and what they really mean. Some think them more legend than gospel. Sumerian rules of succession at the time apparently upheld the rank of a son born to a first wife as greater for inheritance than a son born to a second wife or concubine. Sumerians also upheld that a child born to a relative of the man ranked higher than to a non-relative. Some scholars think Sarah was Abraham's half-sister, which would give Isaac the birthright no matter if Ishmael was born first. Others think 'sister' is a generic term in that culture for any female relatives. Then Muslims point out God said elsewhere that marrying a sister was an abomination, making Ishmael the rightful heir, so even more confusion."

Jennifer nodded. "I see. Three great monotheistic religious nations sprang from Abraham just as prophesied. Judaism through Isaac in Torah, Christianity through the Jewish prophet named Jesus in the New Testament, and Islam via the Prophet Muhammad's Quran version of Ishmael's Arab branch."

"Yes. Once Muhammad reinterpreted Abraham's story, Muslims hated Jews for their cruel treatment of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Both

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