

## Chapter 1

Madeline interrupted her pruning to glance up. An old clunker was cruising up the street slowly and deliberately at about five miles an hour. Its muffler made a chugging, clanking sound. The driver scowled, scanning the street on either side of Ridge Drive.

When he came a little closer she could see that he was swarthy-skinned with black as coal hair and dark eyes — or were those sunglasses? He seemed to be middle-aged to judge by the wrinkles in his face. He was not your typical, bored teenager searching for thrills.

Something in his frown put her off. She shrugged, assuming that he would soon be gone if he couldn't find what he was looking for.

Madeline lopped off another branch of the pyracantha bush with mean thorns that had little white flowers all over it. Pyracantha bushes lined the driveway wall that separated their yard from the new neighbor's. Her father was pulling up desert grass between the landscaping stones that covered the front yard in the dry desert caliche soil of southern Arizona. Her mother was watering the potted plants that lined the front driveway. This time of year, in early May, the flowers needed watered every day because it never rained.

“Heard anything new from Wyatt?” Drew called over his shoulder, not noticing the strange-looking car. As he talked, bits of yellow mustard squeezed themselves out of the corners of his mouth. He wiped them away with his hand and went on munching, chatting with his mouth full.

Madeline's boyfriend, Drew, had come over for the day. Already he'd gobbled down two half carver turkey sandwiches from Boston Market, both dripping with mayonnaise and mustard. He

was on his third. He managed to clip and gorge himself at the same time. He was getting mustard in his dark brown hair that created a riot of curls all over his head, including over his eyes.

“His battalion’s still stationed in the Green Zone in Baghdad as far as I know,” her father answered as he weeded and played back client messages on his cell phone. “Troop movements are secret, of course. He did mention some big project afoot last time he called. I’m trying to remember what.”

Her mother sneezed. She fished out a Kleenex and glanced up, ready to blow her nose. Her mouth fell open when she saw the beat up car.

Her father pushed the end button on the cell phone as he stood up with a clump of grass in his hand. “Now I remember! Wyatt and his buddies are trying to wire the American sector of town for cable TV and high speed Internet.”

Drew laughed, “Sounds kind of high tech for a place like Baghdad. Is Wyatt sure the terrorists are ready for all that?”

Madeline never liked to imagine her older brother in such a far off, dangerous city. She wished he’d come home soon. He’d said something about a furlough for Christmas in his last email. Then the violence wasn’t dying down. It seemed to be escalating. His last leave had been canceled. This one might be, too.

It was hard to think about Wyatt right now with his big, horn-rimmed glasses, serious ways, and that high tech gadgetry he was always carrying about and discussing in his emails.

The clanking sound of the muffler was getting louder and louder. It was blocking her thoughts about anything else. And the driver — why had he slowed down to a bare crawl?

“Wyatt said his battalion might be assigned cable stringing duty in another sector of town,” her father remembered. “Baghdad has a lot of neighborhoods. It’s part of a new agreement with the Maliki government.”

Her mother wasn’t listening. Her gaze kept on wandering to the car practically in front of their house. She brushed her brown bangs out of her eyes and tucked them up into the coiffure that was pinned up behind her head. Nervously she raised her hand to her long, well-sculpted neck that belied her years. Her slender fingers

tried to close around something that wasn't there.

"One of these days I'd like to give Wyatt a hand in putting down those insurgents," Drew nodded decisively, totally oblivious to everything going on around him. "What about Brittany? Anything new?"

Drew took another huge bite out of the sandwich he held in one hand while he operated a small rose pruner with the other. He put down the clippers to fetch a bottle of French's yellow mustard that he'd left sitting on the masonry wall. He squirted the sandwich with it and went on stuffing himself.

Mom's hand trembled. She dropped the watering can. Its contents sloshed all over the stones. She picked it up and refilled it at the spigot. In a determined fashion she looked down at the potted plants.

Dad sighed with his back to the street. "Brittany's trying to keep her spirits up. But she says she's lonely in Havana by herself. Americans aren't supposed to be there."

"As they say, love is blind," Drew took another bite of his sandwich. He glanced up at the wreck of an automobile making the racket. He paid no more attention to it than he would to the postman or the paper delivery boy. He jogged over to his own car flashing the bumper sticker: THESE COLORS DON'T RUN, parked along the side of the street only a couple yards from the noisy car. He leaned over the dashboard and fetched his iPod. He started playing muzak as he slammed the door.

"I'll give her what legal advice I can. She's fighting an uphill battle for Mo. She says he's innocent. You know about the government case against him," Dad reminded Drew.

Drew nodded. "Yeah, Maddie told me everything. Real hopeless."

Madeline wished they'd change the subject. She didn't like to admit to anyone, especially anybody from her high school, that her older sister was in love with an accused terrorist locked up at Gitmo. Kids would give her a freaked out look, screw up their faces, and pry, "How did *that* happen?"

"*Ouch!*" Madeline pricked her finger on a pyracantha thorn. The car had stopped in the middle of the street right in front

of their house. The driver was so close Madeline could make out his big, dark sunglasses in detail. His face was rather thin, with a pronounced goiter and pointed chin. It made her wish she had her camera to capture his striking image.

*Have I seen him before? He looks familiar ...*

Her mother not only dropped her watering can, she tripped and fell into one of the larger planters. Madeline followed her gaze. Mother stared in consternation at the stranger in the idling car with the noisy muffler who seemed to be glaring back at her with equal intensity. She raised her hand to her throat, again groping for something that was not there. She made a choking noise.

The man's lips moved. Was he saying something? Was she imagining it? Madeline couldn't read his lips, though she kept on darting her gaze back and forth between the stranger and her mother.

*This happened before ... But no, it can't be the same ... That was so long ago ... And besides, Mom doesn't have that awful necklace anymore ...*

Her mother leaped up and fled from the front yard. The stranger stepped on the gas and zoomed up the street. Madeline watched her mother flee through the white wooden gate into the backyard and then out the gate to the easement behind the property. She ran around to the backyard of the neighbor next door who had moved in only days before. She hurried through the neighbor's gate.

An old lady with gray hair and glasses was waiting for her there as if expecting her. The fleeting expression on the crone's face was unreadable. Her mother vanished into her house through the kitchen door.

"C'mon, have a bite!" Drew thrust his sandwich into Madeline's face. "You haven't eat anything all afternoon."

She shook her head "no", realizing he hadn't seen a thing out of the ordinary. Her father was busy chatting with a client on his cell phone. He hadn't seen anything either. Neither had anyone else except she and her mother — and the new neighbor next door.