

## **IN THE CROSSFIRE OF HISTORY...**

International cable TV journalist Charlotte Ansari and her Asperger's son are caught literally in the crossfire of history when terrorists, the CIA, Mossad (Israeli intelligence) and the Vatican all converge in a pulse-pounding search for two relics that could eviscerate Christianity and forever change the balance of power in the world. In *The Shekinah Legacy*, author Gary Lindberg uses the form of the thriller to explore the limits and perils of belief.

## **IMPOSSIBLE TO PUT DOWN... UNTIL THE LAST PAGE**

Charlotte Ansari has hunted the big stories around the globe. Then in one week she becomes the hunted. Or are the secret societies that are chasing her throughout India really after someone else?

Gary Lindberg's debut novel, *The Shekinah Legacy*, will delight fans of Dan Brown and James Rollins. Fascinating subplots bring together an unusual cast of characters, all searching for the same ancient objects with startlingly different reasons. This is a book that is almost impossible to put down until you've read the last page.

— Cynthia Kraack, author of *Minnesota Cold* and the *Ashwood Trilogy*

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resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales are  
entirely coincidental.

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# **THE SHEKINAH LEGACY**

**GARY LINDBERG**



**CALUMET  
EDITIONS**

Chanhassen, Minnesota

## **FACT VS. FICTION**

While this novel is a work of fiction, there are a great many facts within it. At many times during the writing of this story, I felt like a bird building a nest out of odd bits and pieces of found material. The history of the Sicarii, for example, is essentially true up until the point that the last woman survivor at Masada resurrects the spirit of the movement in a revitalized band of followers. The shrine of Roza Bal in Kashmir is another example; it is a real place, and the location and descriptions of it are accurate – except that I hung a fictional carpet on the wall of the interior chamber. The statue of the Buddha, with the odd markings on its palms, really exists – except for one thing: I placed fictional rubies in those palms as an additional accent. The alternative versions of the birth, travels, crucifixion and tomb of Jesus are derived from the beliefs of people of various faiths and not invented by me. The book by Notovitch and the letter entitled *The Crucifixion by An Eye-Witness* are both historic documents, and the stories behind them are factually presented according to my sources.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would not have had the persistence or ability to write this book without the encouragement and help of many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. First and foremost, to my wife, Gloria Lindberg, who endured with buoyant spirit my countless research and writing sessions, during which times I was not a very good companion. To Jennifer Renaud, my daughter, and her husband Erik, who contributed their home in Seattle for many of these sessions and never once made me feel like an outcast. To my son Scott, to whom I first unveiled the rough sketch of my story in one tumultuous (and I fear very disjointed) speech over dinner. To Marc Kramer, my good friend, who read my chapters in progress and never failed to make me believe that at least one person found my work entertaining. To Eldon Kimball, another good friend, who fiercely edited my manuscript for grammar and errors, and managed to leave a few fragments of my original work unscathed. And to Bonnie Lindberg, my sister, who arranged for her book club to read my book; they made too many insightful comments for me to repeat here. And to my son Brendan and my stepson Brant Zwiefel, who gave me continuous encouragement.

While I acknowledge the help and support of these wonderful people and many others in the creation of this novel, I accept full responsibility for all of its shortcomings.

**THE  
SHEKINAH  
LEGACY**

# CHAPTER 1

*From Charlotte Ansari's Notebook, 2007*

Some day you will read this, my Dear, and see more clearly how things came to be. I pray to God that you will forgive me for not having had the wisdom or foresight to prevent the tragedies that befell our little family, though the great sweep of history was against us, as you know.

You may remember that I have always been a compulsive note taker; perhaps that's why I was drawn to broadcast journalism where my notepad and digital voice recorder were my most faithful companions. My notes are serving me well now.

I have never had trouble finding the start of a story except for this one. The real story, I'm sure, began thousands of years ago, but it seems now that the best lead-in to our story was in Iraq, so I will begin there. Every good news story starts with a teaser to grab the audience, and this one certainly got my attention.

I remember that it was impossibly hot and dry on that Tuesday morning in Baghdad. The wind had stirred up a dust storm so thick that you could stare directly at the sun without hurting your eyes. Everything around us was eerily tinted orange. It was like being stuck in a block of amber looking out. I turned to my cameraman, Curt.

"Oh yeah," he said, "been in worse dustups than this." He wrapped the small video camera in a big baggie he got somewhere in the Green Zone. "To keep the grit out," he explained. "The camera can see fine, but we gotta keep the dust out of its innards." That's about as technical as he ever got with me. His job was camera and sound, mine was telling a story.

We had worked on many dangerous assignments together, Curt and I, and we knew how to communicate without words. Sometimes, while we were prepping for an interview, the subject would be more candid than during the shoot. That's when Curt would start his camera. He was quite adept at aiming the lens while the camera was in a lowered hand. With my hot lavalier mic picking up every word, we got many remarkable sound bites without the subject ever suspecting.

I smiled when I looked at the tiny patch of gaffer tape Curt used to cover up the telltale red light on the camera that lit up when he was shooting. Without ever mentioning it, I know we both hoped for an unguarded comment from this day's interviewee Siyyid Muqtada al-Sadr, the influential Shi'ite cleric who controlled the powerful Mahdi Army.

I had worked for two months to get this interview, manipulating every contact I had. Today was the appointed day. Perhaps my celebrity helped gain this opportunity. Who knows? On that morning I believed I was on the brink of another big ratings coup for CCN. Who else could have engineered an interview with the secretive Siyyid during a time of brutal sectarian conflict between the Mahdi militants, Sunni insurrectionists, Iraqi army and police, and the Americans?

Looking back on it, I am embarrassed by my arrogance and ambition. My career seems so insignificant now. I would give it all up—would give anything at all, even my life—to make things right again. As a journalist I was known for maintaining perspective in my stories, but I lacked that very quality in my personal life. I feel now that I was a fraud as a mother, mostly absent from your life as my mother was from mine. How could I have repeated that sad pattern after feeling the child's pain myself?

Nevertheless, on that day in Baghdad I could only think about the interview and how it would burnish my crown as the queen of international broadcast journalism. Was I afraid as our military convoy left the Green Zone? I suppose, a little. But mostly I feared the IEDs and their indiscriminate violence. My conceit was so engorged by past successes that I couldn't imagine enemy combatants not wanting my help to tell their stories. Why would they harm me when I could deliver their points-of-view to millions of viewers worldwide? I felt more protected by my celebrity and my audience than by my flak jacket or the dozen American soldiers who guarded me on the first leg of this journey.

And so we headed out, not knowing how much we didn't know.

## CHAPTER 2

The convoy of four military vehicles grumbles out of the Green Zone with Charlotte and Curt in the third vehicle, an up-armored Humvee. Charlotte Ansari peers out of the rectangular side window as the sepia sandstorm chokes the groaning engines and grinds off the desert camo. It is already over 100 degrees Fahrenheit and sweat bubbles up on Charlotte's face and neck. Inside the Humvee it's closer to 120 degrees. She glances at Curt, who is busy shooting dim footage of a ten-year-old with one leg. The boy is steering a wobbly bicycle alongside the convoy into the teeth of the gritty storm.

Human interest stuff.

Bud, the Marine driver, and Chopper (who is "riding shotgun," according to Curt) are rudely silent. Charlotte knows they blame her for this dangerous foray into the nightmare gauntlet of Baghdad streets, a mission that puts a dozen soldiers at risk for no military purpose.

Instinctively Charlotte pulls her loose black veil protectively around her eyes though the driving sand can't penetrate the thick glass of the window. She starts to rehearse her questions for the Siyyid. "Is there any hope in your mind for peace with the Sunnis?" and "Is it inevitable that Iraq will be divided into Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish partitions?"

Curt is zooming in on the face of the youngster on the bicycle who has managed to keep up with the convoy while pumping the pedals with one leg. In close-up, Curt watches the boy pluck a cell phone from his pocket. Instead of punching buttons or putting the phone to his ear, the boy simply holds the device in his hand. And then stops.

Something is wrong here. Curt knows it. And then it dawns on him...

"Stop the truck!" he screams.

His voice is so loud that Bud squashes the brake pedal with his foot and the vehicle skids to a stop.

“Stop them all!” Curt yells.

Chopper turns angrily to Curt, snarling. “What the hell—”

“That boy...” Curt begins to say.

And then an IED explodes in a flaming ball of scrap metal and human flesh. The first two vehicles are torn apart. A Marine’s dismembered body slams into Bud’s windshield, cracking the blood-spattered glass. An axle from the second vehicle spears the radiator. Charlotte is thrown into Curt’s lap, slicing her head on the door.

Chopper holds a hand to a bloody eye and desperately radios for help.

Within seconds three Toyota pickups surround them. Bearded men in plaid shirts pour out of the vehicles waving machine guns. Bud pulls a pistol and starts to fire, but then Charlotte hears a rattle of machine gun fire. When she turns, Bud’s body is jerking with the impact of the bullets. Blood spurts onto her face. Hands wrench open Chopper’s door and Charlotte sees the flash of a knife, then the Marine’s neck begins to gush red.

She screams.

The back doors are torn open. She and Curt are dragged into the street. All she can hear now is laughter and Arabic cursing. She is kicked hard and her veil is stripped off. She can see Curt lying on the street, three rifles pointed at his head.

One of the men, a stout Iraqi with crooked teeth and a slashing scar across his cheek, kneels down to look at her face. “And who are you, riding in the American Humvee?” he asks in a thick accent.

The wind whips his dark hair as another man hands him the camera.

“Journalists!” he says. “Welcome to my country. Want an interview?” And then he laughs.

The one-legged boy steers his bicycle up to the stout Iraqi and hands him the cell phone. The man ruffles the boy’s hair and pats him on the back. He looks back at Charlotte, staring, then takes the woman’s chin in his sweaty hand to get a better look at her face.

“I know you,” the stout man says. “From the television!”

Charlotte glances away. Her celebrity seems little protection right now.

“You are lady from CCN—am I right? Charlotte something. I am great admirer of your work.”

The man says something to the others in Arabic and they all laugh.

The man turns back to Charlotte. “You are famous. And now I will be famous, too—the man who captured Charlotte something from CCN. They will pay a lot of money to get you back, Famous Woman.”

Charlotte is lifted to her feet. A quick glance reveals that all the soldiers in the fourth vehicle are dead. She and Curt are thrown into the back of a pick-up, hog-tied, and blindfolded. With mad yelps and shots fired into the air, the insurgents

clamber into their trucks and bolt the bloody scene.

The pick-up rumbles down rutted streets, bouncing over debris and bashing the bound bodies of Charlotte and Curt. After half-an-hour the journey is over. Bruised and bloodied from the turbulence of the ride, Charlotte and Curt are pulled from the truck bed and their feet are untied. Prodded by the sharp barrels of guns, they stagger sightlessly down a rocky walkway, careen through a door, and climb a tall stairway. Hands shove them into a room. They crash into a stone wall and slide to the floor, scraping their foreheads and shoulders.

Charlotte is dizzy with fear and pain. She can hear the sounds of punching and kicking, and she knows the men are working over her partner. Curt grunts with each blow and Charlotte can hear him vomit. The sharp, sour smell assaults her nostrils.

Suddenly her hair is yanked upward. Are they going to torture her, too?

A voice barks, "Famous Woman, I am going to watch CCN now. Maybe they will tell that you are now hostage. You see, I make you even more famous!" It's the voice of the stout Iraqi, who laughs at his own joke.

But then he stops. In a bored tone he says, "But first, my men wish to welcome you to their home."

Rough fingers begin to tear open her long-sleeved blouse and pull down her skirt. She starts to kick, striking one man in the face. The man screams painfully but the others laugh, apparently believing that pain inflicted by a woman is hilarious.

Strong hands restrain her legs and push up her bra to expose her breasts. Charlotte can feel the humid heat of someone's breath on her skin, the prickly brush of a beard or moustache.

An Arabic phrase pops into her mind, an Iraqi tribal saying that had been taught her by a translator on a previous visit to Baghdad. At that time the phrase had made her laugh, it was so ridiculous. But the translator had urged her to remember it because, he said, in Iraq there would always be a time when all options were exhausted and it would be necessary to plead for protection.

"Ana bisharbic," Charlotte says. "Ana bisharbic." *I am in your moustache*. So silly! What a thing to say when you are about to be gang-raped by terrorists.

The room becomes quiet and still. She hears a slap, and then her legs are released. *I am in your moustache*, she thinks. *Protect me*. In Iraqi tribal tradition, if someone asks for your protection, it is shameful to refuse it.

She hears many footsteps and a door closing. She senses that the men have left. Her hands are still tied behind her back, but her feet are free. She twists her body to face the cool stone wall and presses her blindfold against it. The coarseness of the stone catches the cloth and she is able to lower her face, pulling the blindfold above her eyes. She turns so that her back is against the wall. At last she can see the room.

All their captors have left. There are three shuttered windows on the wall.

Sunlight beams in from the edges. Curt lies unconscious on the floor. His face is bruised and puffy. Blood flows from his mouth, but he is breathing.

Sitting with her back against the wall, Charlotte lifts her butt off the floor and starts to wriggle her bound hands beneath her rump, but her arms are too short. She looks around the room. It is bare. Using her legs to push herself up the wall, she reaches a standing position. It feels good to stand. She feels more confident standing than sitting. She walks to the window. The shutters are on the outside, but the windows have glass. The room doesn't seem to have been prepared for a kidnapping victim. But then again, these men probably hadn't planned an abduction. They had just gotten lucky.

An idea occurs to her. She presses her buttocks against the glass of the nearest window. Hard. She hopes to break the glass but doesn't want the sound to alert her captors. She pushes harder and hears a crackling sound. The glass has broken. Slowly, she starts to lower her body, hoping to ease the shards soundlessly to the floor. Inch by inch she slides downward. One of the shards digs painfully into her flesh.

One piece of glass slips out and clanks brightly on the hard floor. Charlotte anxiously looks toward the door, trying to hear any approaching voices or footsteps.

Nothing.

She moves away from the window and turns to see a large broken splinter of glass still firmly lodged in the window. Perfect!

She stands again, her back to the window, and maneuvers her hands so that the edge of the shard is between her wrists. She starts to gently saw the cords that bind her wrists. It takes ten minutes, but finally her hands are free.

She pulls her bra down—amazing how this simple act helps to restore her composure—and rushes over to Curt. As she cradles his head, he begins to stir. Sighing, then groaning, he opens his swollen eyes.

"Are you all right, Luv?" he asks. "They did a number on me."

"I'm okay," she replies. "Do you think anything's broken?"

He begins to move his body. Everything hurts, but as he tests his limbs and joints he decides that no bones are broken.

"Help me sit up, Luv, will ya? There, that's better."

"I think we can escape through that window," Charlotte says. "If you can get that old body moving."

Curt grimaces in pain. "I think you should do it yourself. There might be something busted inside of me that isn't made of bone. I don't feel so good."

"Then we'll just wait a bit."

"No, you go. Get help."

"In this neighborhood? I'm not leaving without you."

Charlotte takes his hand. He is cold and shocky.

“Give me just a minute to think,” she says. “Wait here, okay?”

“Not goin’ anywhere right now, Luv. Let me know what you come up with. You’re the brains of the outfit.”

Charlotte stands and walks to the window. It’s a good twenty foot drop to the street below. Yelling for help certainly wouldn’t help—most of the people in this neighborhood are probably insurrectionists.

As she stares at the street, four men approach the wall and stand directly below the window. They are dressed in untucked plaid shirts that seem to be the official uniform of Iraqis. One of the men is pushing a cart covered by a rug. The men are whispering to each other.

Charlotte wonders if these are her captors, or perhaps more accomplices.

As she studies the men from above, she sees one of them whisk away the rug to reveal a cart filled with automatic weapons. In moves that seem well rehearsed, two of the men reach for the weapons and begin to move down the street.

Charlotte’s heart is pounding. *What is going on?*

A loud crashing sound, like a door being knocked down, makes her jump. Suddenly there are shouts and curses, but no shots. Then the sound of footsteps charging up the stairs.

Charlotte crouches against the wall. *What is happening?* She closes her eyes and whispers the one word that might give her comfort—her son’s name: *Greg!*

In the room below, the door crashes down and four bearded men enter. Two of them point machine guns around the room. One of the men, obviously the leader, points with a knife toward Curt. Two men race to the photographer’s side, lifting him up. The leader walks to Charlotte and kneels down. Charlotte’s eyes are still closed. She is shaking violently. A gentle hand strokes her cheek. She hears the words, “It’s all right, but we have to hurry now.”

Charlotte and Curt are rushed down the stairs. The stout Iraqi and seven others lie dead in the lower room. They seem to have been killed by knife wounds, not bullets. A nearly silent massacre.

A car pulls up at the doorway. Curt spies his video camera on the floor and grabs it before he and Charlotte are shoved into the back seat of the car. The leader of the team jumps into the front seat and the car roars away. The other three men simply begin walking down the street, casually blending into the city as if nothing had happened.

The team’s leader turns to look at Charlotte. “That was close,” he says. The man could be an Iraqi, but he has an American accent. “The time of kidnapping for ransom is past. They would have been instructed by higher-ups to kill you by evening.”

“Who are you?” Charlotte asks. “Special Ops? CIA?”

The man turns to stare straight ahead.

“How did you find us?”

The man will say no more. Forty minutes later, Charlotte and Curt are dropped off outside the Green Zone. Their rescuers vanish into the disappearing light. Four marines rush to their side and escort them into the compound.

“Charlotte Ansari, right?” asks one of the Marines.

Charlotte nods.

“Damn lucky. Did they drop you off?”

“Who?”

“The bastards that killed your escort and took you?”

“You don’t know who rescued us?”

The Marine looks confused. He stares at Charlotte, speechless. Then he turns to Curt and sees the video camera in Curt’s hand. It is still wrapped in the baggie. “I’m afraid I’ll have to take this, sir. You’ll get it back.”

Curt shrugs. He removes the baggie and surrenders the camera. Then suddenly he clutches his abdomen. “Don’t feel so good,” he says. “I need a latrine. Now.”

The Marine points to a door about twenty feet away and Curt races to it. Inside he enters a stall and closes the door. He reaches into his pocket and removes a small cassette that he had removed from the camera on the way back to the Green Zone. He wraps the cassette in the baggie, tying it tightly, then drops the bagged cassette into the toilet tank. Curt had known the camera would be confiscated and the tape seized. The camera will be returned to him; of that he’s sure. But the tape, if he gave it up, would certainly disappear into the U.S. intelligence bureaucracy.

Curt emerges from the latrine. “Feel better now,” he says.

“We’ll be escorting both of you to the dispensary,” the Marine explains. “Follow me.”

Curt knows this routine, too. They’ll undress, put on hospital gowns, and during the physical examination their clothes will be thoroughly searched. If the video cassette were in his pocket, it would be lost forever.

Not this time, though.

The pudgy military doctor examining Charlotte is friendly but army-blunt. Looking at x-rays, he points to a blocky shape in Charlotte’s upper left chest area and asks, “What the hell is this? You’re too young for a pacemaker.”

“For chronic high blood pressure,” Charlotte says. “Drugs didn’t help.”

“My goddamn blood pressure’s been through the roof since I got to this hell hole. Wonder why. So what’d they stick into you?”

“Pulse generator. Electrically activates my baroreceptors to help control the blood pressure.”

“Really.” The doctor is impressed. “Does it work?”

“You took my blood pressure. You tell me.”

“Normal. Even after that scary shit you been through. Man, I’ve been in this hotbox too fuckin’ long. Medical technology’s passin’ me by while I saw off legs

and stuff guts back into my boys. By the time I get back to the States I won't be qualified to dump bed pans. Tough to get through airport security with that thing?"

"Got papers from my doctor. So how am I, doc?"

"Famous. All over the news. When one of CCN's people gets plucked you can't get away from the news. But I suppose you mean physically. You'll live."

"Thanks. Then I'd like to go home."

"Okay then. Just one more stop."

"Debriefing?"

"You could call it that."

## CHAPTER 3

### *From Charlotte Ansari's Notebook*

It is difficult to recollect the past, even the recent past. And yet I know that the order of events is important so I will do my best to stitch together this crazy quilt of memories.

During our interrogation in Baghdad, I was grilled. Both sides. Five hours, maybe more. I was treated like I was the kidnapper. I'm not really sure why they were so rude, but at one point I actually thought they were going to water-board me. I'm sure they wanted to.

If they treated me this way, how do they treat the bad guys? (Curt said they treated him the same way—like a terrorist.)

They kept asking me where the tape was. The tape? Oh, the tape that was in the camera. The bad guys must have taken it, I said. No one bought that theory, but it was the only explanation I could come up with. Why was I withholding evidence, they wanted to know. Maybe there was something on the tape that would help them track down our abductors.

They must have thought we faked the kidnapping or something, maybe set it up to make news, because they kept asking me how come we were let go. And why so soon? Because I'm famous, I suggested, but this tart remark didn't go over very well.

They kept asking who rescued us. I thought you did, I said, but that just made them angrier. I honestly think they had no idea who saved us.

We were allowed to go only when Bill Riggins, our Baghdad Bureau Chief, found out what was going on and "stormed the fortress," as he put it. Cambridge Cable News flew us back by charter. Neither Curt nor I had any idea at that time

how much international publicity our kidnapping and miraculous rescue had received. Probably our high profile abduction had embarrassed the military, and nothing pisses off the three-stars in Baghdad like public humiliation. Can't even protect a journalist with a whole U.S. convoy? You guys must be losing the war big time.

It wasn't until I stepped off the plane in Minneapolis and saw you and your father on the tarmac that I realized how terribly shaken I was. I could barely walk across the pavement, my legs were trembling so. I was more frightened in those few minutes than at any time since my rescue. Some sort of delayed stress syndrome? I don't know. But I do know that even though you could not hug me, your presence calmed me down. Somewhere inside you, beneath that impassive gaze, is a storehouse of love. I have always felt it—a mother's insight. We are more alike than you know.

The next couple of days are kind of blurry, but somewhere in there an event occurred which foreshadowed so many devilish things to come. We never could have guessed how it could have involved us.

## CHAPTER 4

The expensive silent alarm system is ridiculously easy to bypass. An American scam. All the costly noise and motion sensors lead to one output, an analog phone line to the security firm. Jumping the line effectively mutes the entire system and evades a broken-line warning to the bored, glowing monitors downtown. The swindlers who set up this system hadn't even bothered to install a wireless backup. Chalk up an extra eighty bucks in profit.

Three men silently enter the house. They will need only a few minutes to find what they are looking for. A secret room in the basement houses a fabulous collection of religious relics collected from black market sources around the world. An eyewitness had described the exact location of the prize they seek.

How unfortunate that the drunken collector's need to impress an appreciative audience had undermined his judgment in people. That is how the informant happened to witness a special showing of the magnificent collection. One relic in particular had piqued the informant's curiosity. Was it not just two weeks ago—three at the most—that an inquiry had come to the informant about this relic?

This particular object, though, was not for sale by the collector. The word *priceless* would seriously understate the value of it. The collector had acquired it from a truly desperate person who had passed it along most willingly to save himself from the curse of it. But the collector had not believed in curses, nor had he fully appreciated the unbroken string of four deaths that had connected the relic's previous holders, a number that would soon increase to five.

Many of the relics are displayed in gleaming glass cases that are suddenly illuminated by amber light as one of the intruders flicks a switch. The room glows eerily but the three men remain almost invisible in their black garments and ski masks. Two of them hold 9mm pistols with attached silencers. They stare nervously at the doorway while the third man, the tallest one, snorts in frustration, confused by the vast array of objects.

In Arabic, the shorter of the men curses and then hoarsely whispers a reminder to the confused one: “A small door under a bottom shelf!”

This relieves the tall man’s perplexity and he begins to search, finding a pair of doors beneath a shelf on the far side of the room. He grabs a brass knob and tugs, but the door won’t open. He tries again, but the door is obviously locked. The tall man looks at his associates and grunts, giving the universal palms-up sign of frustration.

Clearly angry, the short man stuffs his pistol into his belt and marches across the room, grabbing the door knob and pulling it mightily. Once. Twice. Then repeatedly. The objects on the shelves above shake with the man’s rage. Rebuffed, the short man pushes the tall one aside and pulls out his pistol, aiming at the door knob.

“No, no!” the tall man shouts. “You might destroy the relic!”

“It’s not a bomb, you idiot. It’s just a bullet.”

Before the tall man can respond, the short one fires at the door and the wood splinters. The sound is much louder than he had anticipated. All three intruders freeze, as if by remaining motionless they can undo the disturbance. And then they all glance upward, toward the ceiling, their eyes drawn by the faint squeak of floorboards above.

The collector is home, and he is now awake.

The short man wilts beneath the whispered curses of his associates. The tall man motions for them all to press against the wall containing the open entrance and then flicks off the shelf lights. In the silence of the room they can hear their own breathing.

It seems like an hour, but it is only a minute or two, and then a faint swishing sound—slippers, or trouser legs?—can be heard through the doorway. The swishing grows louder. And then the barrel of a rifle slowly enters the room.

The short man swiftly grasps the rifle and plunges a hard fist into the surprisingly soft body behind it. A man crumples to the floor with a loud yelp. The tall man flicks on the shelf lights and the amber glow reveals a short, squat, balding man in a heap on the floor.

The collector.

Seeing the men in black, the collector gasps and tries to scramble to his feet. But the short man whips the barrel of his 9mm across the collector’s face, leaving a bloody slash.

“You will stay shut up!” the short man shouts in English. “Where is the relic?”

“Wha—what relic?” the collector replies. His eyes are watering and his hand is pressed against the bloody wound on his cheek, but then his eyes drift involuntarily to the small splintered door at the far side of the room.

The tall man sees this telltale glance and races to the door, swinging it open.

Inside is a silver metal box. He removes it, but it is securely locked. Never mind—they can open it later.

“Take it!” the collector says. “Take anything you want.”

“Is all we want,” the short man says before removing his black hood.

“Don’t hurt me,” the collector says. A whimper. “I have money here. Let me get it for you.” He is desperate, buying time.

The short man points the pistol at the man’s face, touches the tip of the silencer to the collector’s forehead. “You don’t listen up very good,” he says, grinning now. “I think you will listen more in hell.”

“No, please—please.”

The short man begins to pull the trigger.

The collector clamps his eyes shut, clenches his fists. All he can think of to say now is, “You are the curse.”

The short man doesn’t know what this means, but he likes the sound of it.

“Yes,” he says. “I am curse.”

The gunshot, perhaps muffled by the man’s skull, is not nearly as loud as the first shot.

The intruders race from the room and fly up the basement steps, propelled by adrenaline. The tall man confidently grasps the silver box in his hands. Mission accomplished. And all the better that this was not a suicide mission, for the tall man’s mind is dizzy with the promised earthly rewards.

Like a smudge on black paper, the dark men momentarily gather in the shadows outside the mansion’s back door to take off their ski masks and congratulate themselves.

“I am curse!” the short man declares with a torrent of laughter. “I am curse!” He points his pistol at a window and fakes pulling the trigger. “Phhhht!” He makes the sound of the silenced gunshot, then laughs again.

The tall man somberly grabs the box and sets it on the walkway. With the butt of his pistol he tries to break the lock.

Another *Phhhht!* sings out. The short man jerks, then looks quizzically at his pistol before crumpling to the ground. The tall man’s eyes widen, catching the moonlight as he looks down at his fallen friend.

*Phhhht! Phhhht!* The jaw of the other man disintegrates and he flies backward, dead.

The tall man now understands what is happening. He drops the silver box and plunges both hands into the air, hoping they can be seen in the dark.

Two other men emerge from a hedge that surrounds the mansion. One of them shouts, “Allahu Akhbar!”

The tall man is confused. If these two men are Arabs, why have they killed two of their own? The tall man says, “Assalamu alaikum,” *peace be unto you*. The two

men laugh as they approach. Both are pointing pistols at the tall man.

“Shalom,” the first one says. *Peace.*

The Arab shivers at the word. Hebrew! These men are Israelis. Probably a Mossad assassination team. He is doomed. “I give you silver box,” he says in broken English, then quickly stoops to retrieve it from the ground. But a black boot stomps on it.

“No, we take it,” the Mossad agent explains.

“Of course. My mistaken,” the Arab says, still kneeling. And then he looks up to see the blunt end of the agent’s Beretta.

“Your seventy-two virgins await, and they are impatient,” the agent says. “Elo-kim yerachem!” *God will have mercy!*

Phhhht!

The Arab topples over, a neat black hole in the center of his forehead.

The second agent plucks the silver box from the ground. “They send idiots to do their work,” he says. “Expendables.”

“Yusuf, don’t ever forget—we’re expendable too.”

“But we’re not idiots.”

“I beg to differ.” A third voice has joined the conversation, and it comes from directly behind the first agent, who begins to turn. “Uh-uh, only an idiot would move right now.”

The two agents stand motionless. “There are more of us here,” the first agent says calmly.

“Actually, there aren’t,” the voice responds. “Just the two of you.”

The first agent again starts to turn, but then yelps sharply.

“I mean, just the *one* of you. Like I said, don’t even blink.”

The first agent slowly drops to his knees and then slouches over. The voice has an arm that withdraws a short dagger from the agent’s back and pushes him forward. The agent lands on his face like a bag of sand.

The second agent has not moved, but he bravely mouths the words, “You want the box?”

“Yes I do,” the voice says. “But first I want you to open it.”

The agent tries to open the box, but it is locked. “Can’t open it,” he says.

“Too bad. I dislike failure.”

“You are CIA,” the Mossad agent says, his voice brightening. “We are on the same side! You must have mistaken us for Arabs.”

“No mistake. And no CIA.”

The agent is confused now. “But then—if you are not al Qaeda, and not CIA...”

“And definitely not Mossad...”

“Then—” The agent’s voice quivers suddenly. “Then who are you.”

The voice is now directly behind him. “The angel of death.”

And then a sharp cold finger of pain penetrates the Mossad agent's back. He sucks in his breath. It's an icicle! Long and jagged and freezing. In his lung now. Twisting. *Oh God!* he wants to scream, but the air is gone out of him. No voice, no strength. Slowly he sinks to his knees while the voice behind him whispers...

“Allahu Akhbar. Elokim yerachem. And may His countenance shine down upon you and give you peace. Amen.”

## CHAPTER 5

Home is not the comfort that Charlotte longs for. Her husband Mihad, who everyone in America calls “Mike,” is loving and gracious before the hometown cameras at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, but inside the chartered limousine he seems dispassionate and businesslike as he inquires about his wife’s ordeal.

In his flat tone Charlotte detects the polite voice of a business partner, not a lover. And in the limo, away from prying eyes, there is no rapturous personal embrace in the back seat, only a protective arm around her shoulders. Kidnapped and tortured, she has returned to a husband who welcomes her home with less emotion than he showed Missy, their lost golden retriever, when that fawning mutt had been found and brought back to them.

After an awkward pause in conversation, Charlotte asks, “How is the restaurant?”

“Holding up. The new Applebee’s hasn’t hurt us as much as we feared. Masoud thinks that our moderate-priced ethnic niche may have the combined advantage of novelty and quality.”

“That’s wonderful dear.”

The new topic seems to stoke Mike’s interest and he builds up some steam in talking about his latest business venture. Charlotte sighs quietly. What did she expect? After three successive business failures, her entrepreneur husband’s wounded pride needs a dose of rehabilitation.

“Last month was very encouraging—receipts up 25%, not bad for a fledgling restaurant facing chain competition, huh?”

“I think you’ve done it this time, Mike.” She is trying to encourage him, but the tepid delivery undermines her.

“Maybe so, maybe so. Still early though.”

Charlotte turns to Greg, her nearly thirteen-year-old son, who sits to her left.

She seizes Greg's hand and grips it hard. He does not, *can not* respond, but continues to gaze out the window reading the signs that pass by, perhaps memorizing them, as if each one contains a secret message that only he can decipher.

Mike's unceasing business chatter provides the soundtrack for the rest of the ride home. He so badly wants to prove himself to Charlotte and to talk away his own fear of failure that he can't stop babbling. The more passionate he becomes about the restaurant, the more Charlotte resents his lack of passion for her.

The Ansari home is a 10,000 square foot mini-mansion on Lake Minnetonka, the largest lake in the Twin Cities. The house is ringed by tall spruce and guarded by an imposing locked gate that swings upon as Mike presses a button on the remote in his pocket.

The fifteen-foot tall living room frames an enormous window that presents a spectacular view of Maxwell Bay. Late afternoon sun glistens off water skiers who skim across the surface of the lake. Charlotte slumps into a soft white sofa and closes her eyes.

"A drink?" Mike asks.

"Swore off booze. A trade for my life."

"Glass of wine then? Jesus turned water into it."

"Help yourself."

Mike walks to a small bar and opens a bottle of brandy. His cell phone rings and he picks up. "Mike here... uh-huh. Okay, wait, give me a minute."

Mike pours himself a shot of brandy and starts to walk toward a littered office that fronts the living room. "Sweetheart, it's Massoud. Gotta take this call."

He closes the office door behind him. Charlotte feels suddenly very alone. She staggers to her feet—her legs are shaky—and walks up a spiral staircase to Greg's room. The door is closed so she knocks. Greg never answers a knock, but somehow she knows that he prefers an announced entry.

Greg sits at a desk in front of a 21-inch computer monitor. He is listening to a Gregorian chant. The walls of his room are covered by family photographs.

"Hiya... mind if I come in?" Charlotte asks.

No response.

She enters and starts to study the family photos. "What have we got here?" she says. A rhetorical question. Greg's room has become an historical mural of Charlotte's and Greg's lives. The boy has found the snapshots and negatives from their past and created a giant collage.

"Wow!" Charlotte says. "Had no idea we had so many pictures. Where'd you find them all?" She knows that she will not get an answer to her question. Instead, Greg will enter the conversation several exchanges from where it stands now. He is like a chess player thinking several moves ahead but unable or unwilling to pull himself back to the present tense to play out the intervening moves. He is brilliant.

Also obsessive, dispassionate, perceptive, and often annoyingly aloof.

“Father cried when he heard you were kidnapped,” Greg says.

“Did he, now?” Charlotte says, a bit startled. It always takes her a few minutes to get used to conversing with her son. Greg has skipped the small talk and gone directly to the point that she was inching towards.

“That’s what you wanted to know,” Greg explains. He turns but does not look into his mother’s eyes, extending the distance between them. “He cried, but then he repressed his feelings. His obsession with the restaurant is a confused attempt to regain his place in the family. He feels emasculated by your fame.”

Greg is also tactless. Painfully blunt, rather. The same genetic anomaly that stripped him of the ability to express emotion also stole any instincts for social grace. He does not mean to hurt anyone, simply to communicate the facts.

Charlotte approaches Greg and puts her arms around him. He sits motionless, frozen, knowing that the physical contact is important to her, but unable to respond. She kisses his neck and his forehead, strokes his hair. He lets her do this, always has. Likes it, even. A small sense of contentment sweeps through his body, but not enough to make him move.

“I know you love me, son, even if you can’t say it. In Iraq... I was afraid I’d never see you again.”

A voice startles her.

“Char, you know he doesn’t like that.” Mike is standing in the doorway.

“No, I don’t know that.” Charlotte takes a step away from Greg. She’s not sure, actually, what Greg likes or doesn’t like. “I think after what I’ve gone through I have the right as his mother to give him a hug, don’t you?”

Mike looks at Greg, who is staring at the family pictures on the wall. “My God, Char—you’ve been gone for five weeks. You’re gone so much the boy hardly knows you any more. He’s changing, growing up. Greg? Would you like to be left alone?”

Charlotte stares at her son. He is brilliant in many ways, and is able to find connections between things that others never see, yet he is so oddly detached from reality and emotions. She stands there amazed at his brain and wondering why he was both blessed and cursed with Asperger Syndrome.

The phone rings, filling the silence. Mike grabs the land line in Greg’s room. “Char, it’s for you. Why don’t you take it downstairs?”

Charlotte turns to leave Greg’s room.

“Pizza,” Greg says.

Char looks at her son and says, “What?”

“You were going to ask me what I wanted to have for supper.”

She was? Of course.

“Oh, right... Should we go out?” she asks. But Greg has left the conversation.

## CHAPTER 6

### *From Charlotte Ansari's Notebook*

I remember that you wanted pizza that night, but of course the phone call changed that, and everything else. Did I even explain that call to you? Probably not; a mother's protective instincts. It never occurred to me that this business call would involve you as much as me.

It was Robert "Bud" Schiebel, news director of Cambridge Cable News, on the phone. My first thoughts were not kind. Can't you give me one damn night at home with my family after I was almost beheaded for your frigging organization? But of course I didn't say that. I listened like a good little girl as he explained a breaking news story. Just across the Lake from us a big-time business leader had been murdered in his home.

Creepy, sure, so close to home. But what did it have to do with me? He wanted me to look into it. I think that's when I actually became insubordinate and told him to go perform an unnatural act on himself. Don't know what got into me. But I'm the international correspondent, I said. I haven't covered local crime stories since I left Channel 12 in St. Paul years ago.

Turns out the guy who got killed was really big-time, the CEO of a huge healthcare conglomerate with tentacles all over the country. And there was something else, something a contact leaked to CCN that even the local media didn't know. The killers were found dead at this guy's mansion. Possible international implications... Was I listening now?

I do remember calling Marcus Elliot, an old friend of mine at the FBI. I did him a couple of favors when I was local, holding stories, things like that. He's the Minneapolis Bureau Chief now. He wouldn't talk to me about the murder on the

phone but said he'd meet me at a local restaurant. So I went there, and Marcus showed up about fifteen minutes later. Real nervous. He said everything was under extra tight wraps, shouldn't talk to me.

Well, I've learned a trick or two in dealing with these guys—military, CIA, local cops—and I finally got a few juicy tidbits out of him, strictly off the record. We agreed it settled our account. Their theory was that one group broke into the CEO's house to steal a religious relic the guy had bought on the black market and ended up killing the owner. Then another group showed up and everyone ended up dead. Three Arabs and two Israelis. The five dead bodies were posed side by side with arms stretched straight out mimicking Jesus on the cross.

Obviously, everyone didn't end up dead. Someone killed the other five.

There was one other weird fact that Marcus let slip. The collector was found in a secret relic room with a bullet in his brain and a book in his hands. The book was *The World's Great Wisdom Traditions* by Thompson Walker.

Yes that Thompson Walker. Your grandfather. My father.

But then I guess you found out about that, didn't you?

## CHAPTER 7

Charlotte parks her Land Rover in the garage and bursts into the kitchen like a grenade with the pin pulled. A multiple murder across the Lake, a victim holding her father's book... Her whole family could be in jeopardy. They need to lock up, figure out what's going on.

"Mike!" she yells. "Mike, where are you?" Frantically she races into the living room, sees illumination in Mike's office and shouts, "Mike, I need you now!"

Mike opens the office door and looks out, obviously annoyed at the yelling. He holds a cell phone to his ear and points to it, mouthing the words, "On the phone."

Exasperated and frantic, Charlotte runs to the front closet and finds the security alarm panel. The system is unarmed. She tries to arm it but the system seems dead. More frightened now, she takes the stairs two at a time up to Greg's room. Without knocking, she opens the door. Greg is staring at his computer monitor. The screen is filled with text.

"Greg, are you all right?"

The boy does not answer.

"I—I'm sorry for barging in."

"It's an e-mail," Greg says without turning.

The non sequitur stuns her. *Who's talking about e-mail?*

Still worried, she tries to act calm. "That's good, dear. From a friend?" Greg has few friends his age. He doesn't make friends easily, so the possibility that he is communicating with someone—*anyone*—is encouraging.

"Kind of," Greg says.

"Don't mean to be nosy, but who's your friend? Perhaps we could have him over some time." It occurs to her that Greg is talking in real-time now. Twice in one day. The phenomenon calms her down.

"Not a him," Greg says.

*Not a him?* The boy is twelve. He's an Asperger child. How could he have

developed a relationship with a girl? Maybe he's on Facebook.

"It's from Grandma Walker."

She couldn't have heard Greg correctly. Charlotte's mother, Miriam Walker, has been missing for over thirty years. One day, when Charlotte was seven, Miriam had simply vanished. Not a word since. Only a few photographs remain. It's as if she had never existed.

Charlotte glances at Greg's family history wall and sees a picture of her mother holding an infant Charlotte. The woman, pretty with long dark lashes, smiles tenderly as she looks down at her child.

"You know that's not possible, right?" Charlotte says to Greg.

"It's my fifth e-mail from her. She's trying to send me a picture, but I can't open it. I keep telling her that."

Charlotte apprehensively walks up behind her son. She stares at the monitor. Clearly the message has been sent by someone named Miriam Walker. And the message begins, "My Dearest Grandson..."

"What the hell was all that shouting about?" Mike's voice flings up the stairway. "I'm off now. What's so damn important?"

"I'll be right down!" Charlotte replies, and then quietly asks Greg, "Did you say you've gotten *five* messages from this person?"

"I don't know what's wrong with the picture."

Shaken, Charlotte rests her palms on Greg's shoulders for a moment but her hands are trembling and she doesn't want him to notice. She turns and walks out of the room.

What's the matter with her? She's usually the cool one. But she's staggering now, feeling dizzy. She stubs her toe on the doorframe and holds onto the rail as she descends the stairs toward a glowering Mike.

"I was on the phone with Massoud. We've got some problems at the restaurant and..."

"Shut up, Mike," Charlotte says. "That goddam restaurant, it's all you think about." Her face is ashen. Her foot misses a stair and she winds up sitting on a carpeted tread.

Mike rushes up to her. "What is it, Char?" He sits down next to her. She starts to tell him about the murders across the Lake, but her speech is jumbled. She shakes her head, as if that will sort her words. "The person who was murdered," she says, speaking slowly now, "Jack Curtis."

"My God! We were at a Christmas party at his place in December. He seemed kind of surprised that an Iranian would celebrate Christmas."

"Shot in the head."

"Holy shit!"

"Five of them, three Arabs and two Israelis."

“You mean the killers?”

“They don’t know, but they’re all dead. Laid out neatly on the ground like little crucifixes.”

“This is scary. Too close to home.”

“When I think Arabs and murder, I think terrorists. But you don’t know the half of it.”

“I’m gonna lock up the house.”

Mike starts to rise, but Charlotte stops him by saying, “Hear me out first.” Mike sits down by her, closer than before. “They found Jack in a secret room in his basement.”

“A secret room? Don’t tell me he was into some kinky...”

“Relics, Mike. Religious relics. He was buying them on the black market. They found Jack’s body in the relic room.”

“Guy was an asshole, but no one deserves...”

“Listen to me, Mike. They found Jack clutching my father’s first book.”

“What?”

“You heard me. He was holding a copy of *The World’s Great Wisdom Traditions* by the famous Thompson Walker.”

Mike blows air through his lips as he thinks this over. “Okay, that’s a pretty weird connection to the family, but maybe it’s just a coincidence. Doing research or something. If Jack was into religious relics, there might have been some information in the book he needed.”

“Mike, he was lying on the floor with his back against the wall and his brains scattered all over it. I hardly think he was reading a book while terrorists were ransacking his secret room. Someone put it there after he was killed.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“I don’t know anything for sure. Including whether we’re paid up for our security service.”

“I— I think so.”

“You *think* so? Jesus, Mike, you took the responsibility to pay the bills! And now the system’s dead.”

Mike is embarrassed. He studies his knees. “The restaurant—it’s been a lot happening here. It hasn’t been easy with you gone and Greg needing...”

“Sure, blame us. Anyone but yourself. I’ve only been kidnapped by Arab terrorists and practically accused of treason by our own government. That fucking restaurant is going to be the death of us, Mike! I just hope not literally.”

Mike stands up feigning indignation. “You’re making too much of this!”

“Sit down, Mike,” she says sternly. He does. “There’s one more thing you should know. Greg just got an e-mail from my mother.”

Mike swivels his head to look at Char. “Impossible!”

“This is the fifth one,” she says. “Know anything about the others?”

“Nothing. Swear to God.”

“Ever talk to the boy when I’m gone, Mike?”

“Look, if you’re trying to make me out to be the bad guy here...”

Charlotte rubs her face with her hands. She’s got to focus on the issue at hand, not keep picking away at her husband. “Sorry, forget it. Odd timing, though, wouldn’t you say, for a message from my mother?”

“You’re saying the old gal’s still alive?”

“I’m not saying anything. With you whining like a wounded puppy down here I haven’t had a chance to read the messages.”

Charlotte takes a deep breath and stands, looking around the house. Everywhere there are shadows. “I’m as afraid in my own house right now as I was in Iraq and I’m not even sure why. No one’s directly threatened us. Have they?”

She looks straight into Mike’s eyes.

“No,” he says. “Not directly.”

## CHAPTER 8

The man in black whistles and taps his hand on the dashboard of his Mazda CX-9. The country music on the radio is sappy but sweet to the ear. It's been a good evening so far, but it's not over. Now that those arrogant Arabs have been put in the arms of Allah, and the mighty Mossad agents have been dispatched to Yahweh, the man has just one more assignment. An easy one.

He lifts the silver metal box from the passenger seat. The man unlatches the lid and looks inside.

Still empty. Same as when he first broke into it.

He smiles and chomps a fat wad of gum, making it crack. Of course the relic is missing. Jack Curtis did not become CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation by being stupid. He already would have sold the relic to another billionaire collector, or hidden it in some even more secret location with a counterfeit on display. This box is a fake—the man is sure of it—and the lack of contents means that Jack Curtis may still be waiting for a forged relic to place into it. Or not.

So many mysteries.

The man is at peace with his murderous work. Just as Jack Curtis was a relic collector, the man in the Mazda is a garbage collector. He helps rid the world of human trash, much of it toxic. His organization is global and its pedigree centuries-old, yet only a few of the most powerful men know of its existence. That secrecy is its power. That, plus a highly trained group of professional assassins.

The man removes a small knife from his belt and thumbs the sharp edge. The man and his brethren pride themselves in the quiet, clinical precision of their knifecraft, though circumstances sometimes call for back-up weapons such as a 9mm Glock or a PSG-1 sniper rifle. To shoot an assigned victim, however, is to smudge one's reputation ever so slightly.

Parked just outside the gate to Charlotte's home, the man spits his gum into the silver box and closes the lid. Six men dead for an empty box.

The man removes a handheld device from the glove compartment and switches it on. A screen flickers to life, painting his shadowy face with a green glow. On the screen a small dot pulsates along the edge of a large, dark shape he knows is the Lake. Spidery lines define the road on which the man is parked. Yes, the target is at home.

The exhilaration of killing the Israeli agents has dissipated and fatigue is settling like ground fog in his bones. He sighs. By sunrise his mission will be done and he can sleep.

The man steps out of the car and walks slowly toward the locked gate that is meant to keep out cars, not people. He walks around the east side of the gate and stalks the house, staying concealed in the moonshadow. As he approaches from the rear he stops to study an illuminated second floor window. That would be the room of Greg Ansari, a boy of rare but unappreciated gifts whose mother stands in the crossfire of history.

He screws a silencer onto the barrel of his Glock and straps on night vision goggles. He will not fail to complete his mission.

## CHAPTER 9

Greg scrolls through the e-mail from his grandmother. He knows almost nothing about this woman except her name and what she looked like as a younger woman. A few images of her are posted on his wall. Charlotte never talks about her mother except to say that she disappeared one day and was never heard from again.

The boy also knows little about his grandfather. Thompson Walker seems to have been erased from the family's history when Miriam Walker vanished, although Greg knows that Grandpa Walker occasionally sends letters to Charlotte. Greg has seen them unopened in the recycling bin.

The emails from Grandma Walker started to appear in Greg's Inbox just hours ago, whetting his insatiable appetite for unsolved mysteries. Where has his grandmother been all these years? Why has she not contacted the family until now? What picture is she trying to send her grandson whom she has never met?

Greg knows that this mystery is already dominating his thinking. No matter how often his parents explain that Asperger's is a gift and needs no cure, he still curses his brain for its extremes. When do extraordinary powers of concentration cross over into obsession? And when does an ability to find order in chaos become merely a freak show?

Greg's mind is whirring now. He prints off the e-mail and focuses on the cryptic header information:

```
Subject:  
Hello  
From:  
miriam.walker@globex1.com  
Date:  
23 Jun 2007 20:16:41 CDT  
To:
```

```

greg@ansari.us
X-Account-Key:
account2
X-UIDL:
446662569
X-Mozilla-Status:
0001
X-Mozilla-Status2:
10000000

```

The header information goes on for many more lines. Nothing seems unusual about it except that Greg can find no website for globexl.com and the WHOIS data about the owners simply lists John Smith (jsmith@globexl.com) at a post office box in Los Angeles as both administrative and technical contacts. Obviously a bogus listing.

The message itself is friendly but terse, not what you'd expect from a grandmother who has suddenly reappeared after three decades of absence.

```

Dear Greg:
I'd like to introduce myself. I'm your Grandma
Walker. Sorry I've been unavailable until now.
I hope you are doing well and like the attached
photo. Will write again soon.

```

The message is so simple and matter-of-fact that it's spooky!

Below the message is a block of gibberish. The string of characters looks like a photo that was improperly embedded into the e-mail. Greg has seen this before. Instead of the picture displaying, the page coughs up the ASCII characters that define the picture. Greg studies the undeciphered block of code.

```

!@# $ %^=QWE R TY QGDE #RTY*UI=ABCD EFGHIJK

```

```

Dyq4o9553k 697 j7w5 yqf3 29he343e 2y6 *
e8wq003q43e w9 jqh6 63q4w qt9. * dqh[5 3s0o-
q8h h92 g3q7w3 * qj g38ht 2q5dy3e do9w3o6. * qj
8h t43q5 eqht34. J6 9ho6 y903 8w 5yq5 697 28oo
e3d80y34 5y8w j3wwqt3 qhe e9 2yq5 8w h3d3wwq46
59 wqf3 j3l %y343 8w 9ho6 9h3 2q6l ^97 j7w5
r8he 5y3 43o8d g3r943 5y3 95y34w e9k qhe 5y3h
o9dq53 5y3 wqf8941 W33i qhe 63 wyqoo r8hel *
dqh wq6 h9 j9431 @y3h 697 yqf3 5y3 0499r, 430o6

```

59 5y8w j3wwqt3l Q4j3e 285y 5y3 5475y \* 28oo  
 g3 wqf3e1 G75 g3 dq43r7o1 %y343 q43 jqh6 2y9  
 28oo i8oo 59 9g5q8h 2yq5 697 w33il \* yqf3 h3f34  
 w59003e o9f8ht 697l )34yq0w w9j3 eq6 23 28oo g3  
 437h853e1 ^974 j95y34k J848qjl

It seems too short to be a picture; even a small picture would have many more lines and a lot of accented and other odd-looking symbols from the extended ASCII character set—the ones not found on the keyboard—such as:

```
#3RÖbrÑ $4á%ñ&' () * 56789:CDEFGHIJSTU-
VWXYZ cdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz, f,,,...km²èíá4wñ 2 ¦CQ
àêÖÄasû*"°j°RiNtÓM$Ý_gG™»%.Wªî□jdâG%Í 4wñ
_/UçÜSâ,,œ£ ÍÍÁÍ¹µó{·m;ZèâááøIãéô ``ö'h´km²èíá
4wñ™¹¼=, ©ctšKN/šZ@ëSó)óW@W^ š%aªT~ì"%.I°q"
²â•EN2» I$S$ÔÝ+'´ 8pùN?nEupNQRšI»Â-©O HÊÛ©ËÎ× i□
□□px□Å:f±«ê×løjÎËáý÷Ä.'°òïuFÖÖ6xP]9ib½†ôm>R
ää ``ñ□6êósž,Áâs□ö"öÔèËI`ÆSi5i9SçšwtÜçìª >RV}™6A
áùÏ>U□à°ÔêFuzíªt£wk]ÎW□8«ör¼ÜèN□Kj□h>±¹ðÏš¼S-
KwÿfLÅ`çÇjéé°¼Ë YelÅ\M&p`|TÊ-n2^...IÎ£mßh
```

Grandma's code seems very different. Greg decides this is not a corrupted picture at all, but a cipher concealed in some kind of code. And if Grandma Walker sent this cipher to Greg, she must have expected that he could break the code. That would mean the key is somewhere in the message, perhaps in the code itself.

Greg stares at the code, begins to lose himself in the alien landscape of characters. The room ceases to exist. Only the glowing screen with its precisely ordered letterforms remains. Each character, he knows, is an actor in disguise. The assemblage is a masquerade ball at which every guest has chosen a costume according to some secret rule. Discover the rule and the true identity of each guest is suddenly revealed. Somewhere in this cast of characters is a key that unlocks the secret rule. Probably a pairing of characters or groups of characters.

Greg leans closer to the monitor, so close he can see the tiny pixels that make up each character. He is certain that the key is hidden in plain sight because nothing is invisible.

And it will be obvious, because Grandma wants Greg to receive the message.

Greg's mouth is dry with anticipation. He can hear his heart beating and he feels as though he has left his body, become pure intellectual energy, begun to float in front of the screen, become one with the code, moving inside it.

And then he sees it.

The key.

Just as he suspected, it is practically undisguised, wearing only half a mask instead of a full costume. Simple but elegant. And the key identifies a device for encrypting and decrypting this code. Astonishingly, the device is the keyboard that rests like a dumb animal beneath Greg's caressing hands.

Following the instructions provided by the key, Greg's fingers begin to tap the keys. Like an alchemist, the boy translates the leaden code into golden text. He does not look up at the monitor until he is done, and then he lifts his eyes, mouthing the words as he reads.

He squints and shakes his head. It can't be!

He reads the message again.

It has been a long time since he has felt fear, but he feels it now. His heart is thumping. Even the Asperger's Syndrome—that superb emotional anesthetic which unleashes the bliss of objectivity—does not protect him from the terror provoked by this message.

A hand touches his shoulder and he jumps!

"Greg, you're trembling. What's going on?"

His mother and father are standing behind him. What *is* going on?

"I broke the code."

There he goes again, leaping forward, leaving everyone in the dust.

"The what?" Charlotte isn't following him this time.

"There's another message from Grandma Walker—her real message."

"What are you talking about, son?" Mike begins to pace the room. "These e-mails from her have got to be a scam."

"Why would someone do that?" Charlotte asks Mike. "Who would know..."

"I'll print out the cipher," Greg says. He taps the keyboard several times and the printer comes to life, spitting out a sheet of paper.

Charlotte stares at the printer. "This is her real message, you say? Then the uncoded message must have just been a cover."

"Jesus, you guys! This is nuts," Mike complains.

"So is Jack Curtis being killed and five dead bodies in his yard."

Charlotte watches her son turn pale. "My God—I'm sorry. Didn't mean to just blurt it out like that." So odd, Greg showing *emotions* again.

"Nice move there, sweetheart," Mike says.

It has taken this long for Charlotte to understand the significance of Greg's response. "You're frightened—Greg, you're afraid, aren't you?" She can't remember the last time that Greg exhibited fear.

Greg just stares at her.

"That's not like you," Charlotte says. "Emotion, I mean. Is there something else?"

Greg turns and stares at the printer.

“Something in the message, right? Let me see it, Honey.”

Greg reaches for the printer. But before his hand can remove the page, three muffled gunshots break the silence.

And then another shot. Suddenly the bedroom window shatters. Glass flies in all directions. Greg and Charlotte scream. Ducking, Mike runs to them and pulls them onto the floor, covering them with his body.

Two more gunshots and a scream. And then quiet.

Charlotte is sobbing. “They’ve followed me home!” she screams. “Why won’t they leave me alone?”

“Who?” Mike demands.

“The goddam terrorists, who do you think? They won’t stop ‘til they have my head.” She is shaking violently. “They’re coming, I can feel it!”

Greg is crying now. He hasn’t cried in years—no reason to.

Mike reaches into his pocket and finds his cell phone. He dials 911. “We’re being attacked at home. Men with guns!” he screams at the dispatcher and then gives his address. “Mihad Ansari—just get some police here right now.” There is a short pause and he says, “Jesus, okay—M-I-H-A-D A-N-S-A-R-I. That’s important for the obits, right? ‘Cause we’ll be dead if you don’t get some cops here!”