

A faint, grey silhouette of a person stands in the background, holding a rectangular sign. The sign is the central focus of the image and contains the text 'GARAGE SALE Stalker'.

GARAGE

SALE

Stalker

SUZI WEINERT

No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the author, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review. For information regarding permission, please write to: Bluewaterpress LLC.

Text and Illustrations copyright ©2010 by Suzi Weinert
All rights reserved.

International Standard Book Number 13: 978-1-60452-090-3

International Standard Book Number 10: 1-60452-090-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014933889

BluewaterPress LLC
52 Tuscan Way Ste 202-309
Saint Augustine, Florida 32092

<http://www.bluewaterpress.com>
This book may be purchased online at

<http://bluewaterpress.com/GSS>

Editing by Carole Greene

To Don,

For his unfailing encouragement, clever suggestions,
computer rescues, patience and love.

TO MY READERS

Jennifer's passion for garage sales is shared by millions around the globe. For centuries, people have bartered or sold possessions by laying items on a blanket or table top in front of their home or at a local market. Today, garage sales – also known as yard sales, rummage sales, tag sales, attic sales, moving sales, barn sales and estate sales – thrive in the United States. Add flea markets, swap meets, consignment shops, thrift shops and recent internet venues such as Amazon, Craig's List and E-Bay and the result is "*big business*." Besides bargains, a bonus by-product of the second-hand market is that goods are recycled, not trashed. If you haven't tried these sales yet yourself, don't miss the adventure!

We like to sweep unsavory issues like child abuse, neglect and exploitation under the rug, but these serious problems exist and are on the increase. Almost daily, the media feature stories about such offenses. Several ideas for this book sprang from just such news coverage. While it's unpleasant reading, much of the public does so with shocked disbelief, doubting an individual concerned citizen can make a positive difference. Any situation producing traumatized, dysfunctional or dangerous people impacts society adversely. Consider contacting your local, county or state child protective service or a national group like Childhelp to learn how you might participate in constructive ways.

Thank you for reading my book. You may wish to e-mail me at: Suzi@GarageSaleStalker.com

–Suzi Weinert

PROLOGUE

His hands gloved against the cold, the dead woman's lawyer pulled his overcoat tighter against the winter chill, trying to dispel his growing uneasiness about the impending meeting. Gray-haired and well-dressed, he stared at the farm's weathered buildings as he stood in the upper driveway between the dilapidated barn and the old house. Flanking the back door, daffodil shoots emerged just above the cold February ground; perhaps a metaphor for the young man arriving today to bring new life to his deceased mother's home.

Beyond the tangle of overgrown brush and trees, tires crunched in the pebbles far below, where the property's gravel driveway touched the county road. He watched a black pickup truck appear at the top of the long incline and park beside his car. A tall, thirtyish man, built-like-a-tank with erect posture, beefy arms, a bull neck and blond crew-cut hair, stepped out of the truck.

"You must be Ruger Yates." The gray-haired man forced a convincing smile and extended his hand. "Welcome to Virginia. I'm Greg Bromley, your mother's attorney and old friend. After our letters and phone calls about her estate, you're here at last."

Ruger Yates shook his hand. Something about that contact made Bromley shiver. Was it this man's uncanny resemblance to his cruel father or just a reaction to the frosty wind?

A scuffing commotion in the truck bed drew Bromley's attention to a dog's muzzle poking over the edge.

"Hey," Bromley said, "looks like you brought a friend with you."

As he moved closer to see the animal, the large dog growled a warning, leaped out of the vehicle and squared off to confront him. Used to pleasant encounters with friends' pets, Bromley stepped back in surprise, observing this aggressive dog's battered condition. "Whoa, fella! I mean you no harm," he soothed, again trying to befriend the animal by slowly extending his hand to pat its head. But the dog growled louder, lips drawing back to expose menacing teeth and warning the stranger to come no closer.

"Is this dog a rescue?" he asked Ruger. "I mean... the scars and all?"

Ruger stiffened. "The pup found me. I just trained him."

What kind of training produced a dog looking like that? Bromley wondered, but instead he asked, "How long did it take you to get here from Texas?"

"About a week - I camped along the way. Lots of lonesome country between there and here."

"Right," Bromley nodded, wondering if this told as much about the traveler as the land he traversed. "Does the old homestead here seem at all familiar?"

Ruger looked around solemn-faced, almost trance-like, Bromley thought. Did this young man project negative vibes or was it his own over-active imagination? When at last the silence became awkward, Bromley spoke again.

"Your mother and I were classmates and friends for many years. We graduated in the same college class and then both worked in McLean. She taught school here. I always admired your mother. She was such a lovely person then, friendly and bright and very beautiful."

Seeing the blond man register no interest in his mother, Bromley changed the subject. "Hard to believe from what you see here now, Ruger, but this part of Fairfax County was all countryside forty or fifty years ago with lots of farms like your family's big spread." Bromley shivered again as the brisk winter breeze swirled around them. "Here, let's sit in my car while I tell you more about why you're here."

"Stay!" Ruger ordered the dog, with a simultaneous hand gesture. The animal obeyed instantly.

When the two men sat comfortably in Bromley's car, he started the engine and adjusted the heater knob for warmth. "Now where

was I? Oh yes, so when she married your father, I was, well, surprised and maybe even a little jealous." His hope to create a friendly relationship with this young man faded further as the expressionless face stared back at him.

Bromley returned to facts. "I didn't see Wendy - that was your mother's name - for many years after she married until she needed legal help when your father was, ah, arrested and charged." He proceeded carefully; for despite his own revulsion, the man *was* Ruger's father. "Do you know the story?"

Raised an orphan, Ruger knew nothing of his family or early childhood except occasional wisps of frightening recall. Seared somewhere in the childhood recesses of his mind, their terror *demand*ed repression.

"No," he answered.

"Well, it's like this. Your three-year-old sister died under... ah... unusual circumstances. Your father said it was accidental, but the prosecutor looked at the case differently and charged him with... um, a very serious crime. I convinced the jury that your father was mentally incompetent to stand trial, so rather than convicting him of mur... of the greater crime, the state sent him to a nearby mental institution where, as you may know, he died two years later."

Listening raptly, Ruger reacted with surprise. He did *not* know. "My father was insane?"

"That's the verdict I fought hard to get - instead of the alternative of life in prison or, ah, worse." Bromley changed the subject again. "Now that was a bad time for your mother. Her physical and mental health declined markedly during that period, what with mourning her daughter's... *untimely* death and her husband's, ah..." Bromley chose his words tactfully, "predicament. She tried to run the farm by herself and, as it turned out, was also raising two young boys alone. I offered many times afterward to get her professional psychological help, but she adamantly refused."

Ruger stared blankly at the older man. "Raising two young boys?"

"Yes, you and your older brother. Mathis was his name. Apparently she hid you boys somewhere here at the farm during the police investigations pursuant to your father's case, so at that time no outsiders knew you even existed. She had no phone, never left the farm and wrote me to come to the house to talk with her when she needed help or legal advice. Maybe you thought only doctors made house calls in those days." Bromley smiled at Ruger

before deciding that humor, which sometimes lightened awkward situations like this, brought no response from this man. "Because I knew her from earlier days and saw how emotionally fragile she'd become, I dropped by often to make sure she was okay."

"Is that when you found my brother and me?"

"Ah, not exactly. On one visit, after my first distant glimpse of the two of you out by the barn, your mother said you were her sons and told me your names. On every visit after that I asked to meet you boys, but she always said you were busy elsewhere. Then one day when I inquired as usual, your mother said Mathis had 'gone.' I pressed her about where, but she looked frightened and wouldn't discuss it. He was six or seven, so this seemed odd but I dropped it, in order not to further upset her. She gave the same explanation about him on my future visits. To this day I don't know what happened to him.

"Mathis..." Ruger said, reaching for an elusive memory.

"What?"

"That name... I've heard that name," Ruger said aloud, but to himself.

Even if Ruger was only five or six then, Bromley thought it odd not to immediately recognize his brother's name. But he put that aside and continued. "She could live on food from her garden, meat and eggs from the chickens and water from the well, but she still needed money for electric bills, roof repair and so on. So we discussed selling a few acres of her farm. To help her, I networked in town to find a buyer, who paid her an excellent price." He chose not to mention that he didn't profit from these transactions, despite spending considerable time brokering deals to bring Wendey top dollar for her land.

Bromley returned to his story, "When I finally saw you up close for the first time, you didn't look so good." His voice faltered as he remembered the emaciated, unkempt, wild-eyed boy with a welt on his face, a bruise on his arm and a festering burn scar on the back of one hand. "In fact," Bromley feigned cheer, "I thought it might be a good idea for a bright boy like you to attend a military school I knew about, so I made a quick phone call. It took all my persuasive powers to get the school to accept a six-year-old."

After a pause, Ruger asked, "How did I get to the school?"

"Well, I took you with me that very day, bought you new clothes and shoes and then we had haircuts together at the barber shop.

We ate lunch and I drove you to the school.” Bromley frowned as he recalled the clothing store clerk’s offer to discard the tattered outfit Ruger wore into his shop... and how oddly the barber eyed Bromley upon seeing the condition of the boy’s arms and legs, never mind his matted hair. Nor did he describe the restaurant experience, where Ruger wolfed down his food, his thin arms curled protectively around his plate lest it be snatched away and his eyes wary of danger as he ate. “Do you remember any of that? The shopping, getting your hair cut, eating lunch together?”

“No,” Ruger answered, although each of Bromley’s descriptions lasered a pinpoint of light on forgotten pockets deep in Ruger’s subconscious.

“Your mother paid for that schooling by periodically selling off more farm acreage, and the school sent your progress reports to me.”

“To you?”

Bromley nodded. How could he explain to this young man that his mother, her neglect of her son already apparent, told him she hated the boy and wanted nothing more to do with him? In the ensuing years, her distaste for the child didn’t waiver, despite Bromley’s urgings to the contrary.

“Yes, the school sent me your papers, saved for you in this file.” He handed Ruger a folder. “She wasn’t well,” Bromley said and, reshaping the ugly truth into something kinder, he added, “so she asked me to make sure you were provided for financially and pay your school bills.” Should he tell the young man that he paid those bills from his own pocket when his mother’s payments lagged? Would it help this man to know at least one person in the world had cared what happened to him? Probably not...

“How did she die?” Ruger asked.

“She wrote me that she was very sick and couldn’t remember if she’d executed a Will. She had, but since I couldn’t phone to tell her so, I went by. I knocked and knocked but she didn’t answer the door. Over the years she’d become a hermit and didn’t believe in medicine or doctors. Before driving away, I opened her mailbox and found some bills collected there so I went to the McLean post office. Her letter carrier told me she picked up her mail every day during the twenty-odd years he’d delivered it. Then I drove to the police station and brought a patrolman back here with me to

force our way inside. We found she'd passed away in her bed. The autopsy determined she died of pneumonia the day before."

"And you found me through the Army?"

"That's right, Ruger. The military school said you enlisted after graduation. 'Yates' is not a common name, which helped. Years earlier, we'd drafted her Will on one of your mother's good days. Since your parents had no other relatives and your brother had disappeared, you were the obvious beneficiary for the estate. The Will also provided guidelines for her burial, which I oversaw in your absence. The ashes from her cremation are in this box." He reached into the back seat and handed a package to Ruger.

With tightly compressed lips, Ruger took the box, holding it as if scorpions might cascade from beneath the lid and swarm across his body.

Ruger's reaction to his mother's remains increased Bromley's unease, but he cleared his throat and pressed on. "The Yates family has owned this house at least a hundred years, although someone added electricity and plumbing along the way. You don't know the McLean or Great Falls areas yet, so I'll just tell you that your farm's fifteen acres lie between two very desirable residential locations. This property is worth a small fortune. The buildings show little attention for at least the last thirty years. The land is far more valuable than the structures, so if you sell in the future, a builder will demolish everything here for new construction. Knowing this may help you decide how long to keep it and whether major repairs make sense."

Making ready to leave, Bromley added, "Here's a northern Virginia book map which might help initially as you find your way around town. I've marked my office location on this page. We need to sign some papers there tomorrow if that's convenient. Two o'clock good?"

"Yes."

"Oh...I hired a cleaning woman to tidy up, empty the refrigerator and wastebaskets and dispose of the linens in your mother's bedroom. Otherwise, it's as she left it. Here are the keys. Good luck to you."

Bromley waited as Ruger climbed out of his car, anticipating a civil good-bye or thank-you, but none came. Was Ruger Yates always a boorish cold fish or did this return to his childhood home distract him from otherwise conventional good manners?

To avoid the need for facing this man again, Bromley would instruct his secretary to handle the estate document signing at his office tomorrow. Driving away from the farm, he shivered again, this time with relief.

Ruger watched the attorney's car disappear down the driveway before depositing the noxious box of ashes in the farthest recess of the barn, nowhere close to the house. Putting the file of school reports in the cab of his pickup, he again instructed his dog to "stay" and, with a trembling hand, unlocked the back door of his mother's house.

The door creaked eerily as Ruger pushed it open. Cautious, he stood at the threshold several minutes before stepping inside. Silence filled the space around him as dust motes spun in the weak sunlight filtering through filthy windows. The rear entryway, a mud-and-laundry room, led into the kitchen. Ruger waited expectantly for some familiarity to kick in, but none did.

Wary, he advanced into the kitchen and glanced around the room. As he focused on the shabby table and four rickety chairs, an unwanted snapshot of memory flashed into his mind. He and Mathis did school lessons there, the success of which determined whether or not they ate. But failure at lessons meant more than hunger; it meant beatings with any tool accidentally convenient to their irate mother's grasp—a coat hanger, an extension cord, a wooden spoon, a hot pan.

Ruger felt apprehension grow, as if an unstoppable living object had broken free inside him and begun to move—something getting bigger and rising higher within, something that would not remain suppressed any longer. His throat tightened and he drew his arms protectively close to his body as a second memory hurtled up and exploded into his conscious mind. He stared numbly as the vivid old tape replayed in his brain. At this very table his raving mother chopped off one of Mathis' fingers to punish him for spelling mistakes. The gushing blood, the wrenching screams, the total terror...

Ruger stood motionless several minutes, paralyzed by these violent recollections and feeling again the fear and pain inflicted then. Suddenly he strode across the kitchen and dry-heaved into the sink. Recovering at last, he slumped onto one of the ancient

chairs, leaned forward on his elbows and covered his eyes with his hands.

He'd successfully blotted out the old terror these many years. For all his military toughness, he still wasn't ready for this inner child's sickening journey through horrifying past events. Stop this, he ordered himself. That was then, this is now. She's gone; you can do this. Focus on the situation at hand—the same single-minded focus that marshalled you through the near-impossible military assignments where you excelled. Form a plan, eliminate distractions, go!

He stood, did a disciplined 360-degree take of the kitchen and walked across the hall to the parlor. The boys were never allowed into this room. Even now, he stepped back from the forbidden threshold. Finally prodding himself forward, for the first time in his life he entered this area of his childhood home. Like a museum still-life with everything in place, the room was frozen in time. He swept a finger through dust on the nearest end table. Clearly his mother also avoided this room, keeping it perpetually unused and pristine for company who never came.

Returning to the hallway, he followed the threadbare carpet runner's trail from the kitchen to the first bedroom. As a child, he'd peered into but never entered his mother's room. Hesitantly, he opened the door to reveal a bed with bare mattress, an austere dresser, a listing lamp and a tattered floor rug. Adding to the unwelcoming dimness from tightly drawn shades covering otherwise bare windows, an unpleasant sick-room odor assaulted his nostrils. He'd later find that smell concentrated in the mattress when he threw it away. He choked, gripped by unbearable claustrophobia. Backing out rapidly, he lurched heavily against the wall and closed his eyes to gather courage and resolve.

The next bedroom triggered yet another memory. He and Mathis had shared this room with twin beds when one wasn't punished by imprisonment elsewhere in the house or outdoor sheds. "Elsewhere in the house" shook a kaleidoscope of crisscrossed, nauseating images through his mind. He glanced anxiously at the closet and cringed at a vision of the cellar.

Suddenly he couldn't breathe. Clutching his chest, he hurried down the hall, through the kitchen, wrenched open the back door and gulped in the cold winter air. Still sitting in the previously ordered position, his dog studied him, alert for the next command.

“What the hell are you looking at, you mangy hyena?” Ruger shouted, booting the animal fiercely in the ribs. Propelled into the air by the vicious kick, the dog yelped sharply, landed hard and scrambled to recover footing. With an anxious look at its master, the dog eased itself back into the “stay” position again.

His anger relieved by action, Ruger took more deep breaths before finally reentering the house. The second time was easier. He walked back down the hall to the third bedroom, pushed open its door and gaped at a room outfitted for a little girl—a room he’d never seen. Faded hand-sewn gingham curtains hung limply at the window and a matching drab coverlet lay on the simple twin bed beside a scuffed chest of drawers. On a child’s chair sat the shabby remnant of a worn teddy bear, the penetrating stare of its remaining eye aimed straight at Ruger.

He drew back and shut the door hard. Despite no memory of her room, he vaguely recalled a little girl. From Bromley’s story, she must have been his young sister.

Returning to his truck, Ruger sat down to think. Should he stay here tonight or go to a motel? Should he move in here at all or rent a flat in town? Admittedly, this isolation provided privacy and security for his clandestine computer work, never mind rent-free. Until he sold this property, money might get scarce once his military pay ran out and before his “consultant fees” rolled in.

Hadn’t he survived Navy Seal training to which his Army Special Forces unit was attached? Hadn’t he accepted military assignments so risky that only he volunteered? Hell, if he could do that he could take on an empty old house and in the process rid himself of whatever demons it held. The sensible solution was to stay and come to terms with the violent memories.

A simple, constructive plan dawned. He could erase the past by erasing everything in the main part of the house that pertained to it. He’d ditch his mother’s furnishings and substitute his own stuff. He’d transform what was hers into his. He’d take control!

No need for *new* furniture with the length of his living situation here uncertain, but he would need *different* furniture and used would work just fine. Salvation Army and Goodwill sold what he needed. He’d donate this existing furniture while there. Newspaper ads listed household items for sale and didn’t he remember something about garage sales? He considered selling his mother’s old furniture at such a sale of his own but dismissed this idea. A

loner, he didn't like people, didn't want them near this house and certainly didn't want to draw any attention to his living at this location. Still, he might attend other people's sales to find what he needed at reasonable prices.

He'd first transform the girl's room into an office because his on-going work eclipsed all else. He'd sleep in a twin bed in the room once shared with Mathis until refurnishing it as his own sleeping quarters. Next, he'd replace everything in the kitchen and redo the parlor into a comfortable place to watch TV. But the third bedroom, where his mother slept for forty years and where she died, awaited a yet uncertain use. Maybe if he scrubbed every inch of it and let the room stand empty for weeks until he was certain his mother's purged spirit joined her belongings clustered in the cellar, then he could turn her bedroom into a gym. Add a thorough house cleaning and window washing—how long would the whole refitting take? Ten days? Two weeks? Three? As for the cellar, he shuddered, much later, if ever at all...

His face set with resolve. He wouldn't let exposure to gruesome memories change his plan. He wouldn't let their accumulating horror take on a power of its own. He wouldn't let that power push him in directions he didn't want to go. He *wouldn't*...

CHAPTER 1

Jennifer Shannon threw a cardboard box into the passenger side of the vehicle, raced around to the driver's side and jumped into the front seat of the white Cadillac Crossover SUV. Revving the motor, she needed to move fast with only an hour to complete her plan.

Barreling down the street, she glanced at the notebook on the seat beside her to verify her destination. No need to consult the book map since she'd driven that neighborhood before. She fingered the zippered fanny pack belted around her waist, in which she'd stuffed small bills and coins. Earlier she'd locked larger denomination "backup bills" in the glove compartment.

Several turns, a glance to verify the correct street name at the corner, and she slowed to identify house numbers, odd/even, ascending/descending, to establish the correct direction and which side of the street. A cluster of parked cars a block ahead confirmed the location even before the street address appeared on the mailbox. Seconds later, she swung into an open parking spot in front of the house.

From the number of parked cars and array of items strewn before the house, this might be a winner. Jennifer glanced at her reflection in the rear-view mirror. In her rush to get away this morning, rather than dealing with "bad hair" she covered her honey-colored bob with a scarf moments before leaving the house. Now she tightened its knot at the back of her neck and applied the

lipstick forgotten in her hasty no-makeup departure. Rubbing her lips together to spread the color evenly, she turned her perceptive bright blue eyes toward the first garage sale of the day!

She was early – at 7:45 a.m., fifteen minutes ahead of the 8 a.m. start listed in the newspaper ad which, along with numerous others, she'd cut out and taped in her notebook. With luck, she'd hit most, maybe all these close ones, even in this morning's abbreviated time. Out of her car and moving rapidly along the sidewalk, she blended with other shoppers advancing toward the house.

Lots of potential "treasures" here – pieces of quality furniture spread across the front lawn, household knick-knacks heaped on tables along both sides of the driveway, a makeshift clothes rack on a pole suspended between two ladders – items stretching from the curb, up the driveway, back into the garage and even laterally across the front porch. Her pulse quickened!

Sliding purposefully around other shoppers, she began her initial "overview scan" to quickly identify any standout – a piece of furniture, painting, lamp, or other unusual item inviting a hasty claim. She'd disciplined herself to pause briefly like this at the outer edge to scope the scene first, stifling a nearly overwhelming urge to dash instead toward whatever beckoned first. Later, she'd look over the remaining items in more detail. A thorough inspection of a sale this size should require less than ten minutes for her practiced eye.

She noticed the random scatter of "merchandise," *not* arranged into like groups of furniture, luggage, books, jewelry, sports equipment, clothing, appliances, shoes, baby items, tools or household goods. Few were pre-priced, and those tagged bore post-it-notes. A poor sticker choice for uneven surfaces, humid summer temperatures and tag-switching customers, she thought.

The seller, a pinch-faced middle-aged woman, appeared to be running the sale by herself – also not a good idea, Jennifer knew. Aside from answering questions, demonstrating how things work, and keeping an eye out for shop-lifting, cashiering for a busy garage sale crowd required full-focus vigilance. Jennifer hoped the woman had helpers coming soon because even before the 8 a.m. start, Seller was already outnumbered. An amateur operation, Jennifer concluded – hard on the Seller but perhaps advantageous for the Buyer!

Spotting a luxuriant six-foot tall artificial bamboo tree rooted in a handsome brass planter, Jennifer instantly envisioned it gracing a

waiting corner in her living room. Trying to control her eagerness as another shopper appraised the tree by touching its leaves, Jennifer pretended to study a china plate. As soon as the other shopper moved on, Jennifer grabbed the tree, inspected it top to bottom and wrestled it over to Seller, who stood near her garage entrance with one hand clutching a cash box and the other pushing wisps of hair back from her nervous face.

"Good morning," Jennifer began conversationally. "Great weather today for your sale, isn't it? It's a lot of work getting it all ready." She gestured toward the yard. "Are you moving?"

"Well, yes, I...I've sold the house to move to a smaller place," Seller's downcast eyes brimmed with tears. "I recently divorced my husband, and," suddenly her chin came up with resolve, "and the house sold so fast that now I have to be out in just three weeks!"

Maybe priced the house too low? Jennifer wondered to herself. Instead she said, "A garage sale is a great way to clean out the house and make some money in the process. Good idea!"

Seller managed a self-conscious smile. "Thanks, I hope so. I... I've never held one before; actually I've never even been to one, but a friend suggested I try it so..." her voice trailed away.

"After today, you'll be very experienced. How much are you asking for this tree?"

"Oh, I'm sorry it's not priced," Seller apologized. "I ran out of time after midnight getting everything ready."

"Hey, no problem! What amount do you have in mind?"

"I guess \$40. It cost \$80 new and half price seems about right," the Seller reasoned.

Jennifer knew some garage sale buyers thought bargaining tacky and paid the asking price while others considered bargaining practical and even entertaining. The worst the Seller could say was "no."

Classic bargaining strategy dictated offering about 50% of the asking price for a good-condition item. Seller might agree, but if not they usually negotiated toward a compromise figure less than Seller's original price but more than Buyer's original offer. Exceptions included items already very fairly priced or ones priced so ridiculously low that the buyer snapped up the purchase without hesitation.

"Yes," Jennifer pointed to the tree offered for \$40, "but after all, this is a garage sale where people look for real bargains." Per

formula, she offered half the asking price. "Would you accept \$20? You don't want to cart it back inside after the sale if it doesn't sell, do you?"

Seller offered a thin smile. "That's true," she hesitated as other buyers jostled toward her, items in hand. "How about \$30?"

"Sold," Jennifer agreed, thinking the brass planter alone was worth that much. She gave Seller the money and began lugging the cumbersome artificial tree toward her car.

And that's when it happened!

CHAPTER 2

Something thudded hard against Jennifer, knocking her completely off balance! The bamboo tree fell from her grasp and she stumbled awkwardly, wind-milling her arms in a frantic effort to stay afoot. “Why don’t you watch out where the hell you’re going?” a cross male voice snarled as a burly man with a blond crew cut muscled past her. He carried a huge, heavy TV set without apparent effort. Reaching a black pickup, he deposited the TV lightly onto the truck bed as only a powerful weight-lifter could... and without a glance of concern in her direction.

Jennifer quickly looked back toward the sale to see if someone witnessed what happened, but all were engrossed in shopping. She turned again toward the man who’d slammed into her. Despite his gym-trim muscles and hulking football player physique—which might be admired under other circumstances—he accepted no responsibility for the incident he’d just created, moved to the driver’s door of his pickup and climbed inside.

Politeness characterized most garage sale shoppers, and, frankly, everyone Jennifer knew, so she half-expected him to call out an apology or even return to help pick up her fallen tree. Instead, his truck motor roared to life and she heard its gears shift. That he ignored his role in nearly decking her upset Jennifer; but this coarse disregard paired with his startling strength reminded her that raw power in irresponsible hands spelled danger! A look at any day’s newspaper underscored that chilling observation!

This guy acted very differently from the well-mannered men Jennifer only now realized she took for granted. The men she knew not only behaved politely but large physically-intimidating men *doubled* their efforts at respectful, non-threatening behavior around women. Never would her husband, sons, male neighbors or business associates treat a woman so crassly.

Considering this, she felt a new relief that he sped away instead of returning, perhaps to confront rather than assist her. She shivered, the hair on her arms prickling alarm as she watched his truck disappear down the street, grateful that he didn't know or care who she was.

What was going on here? Jennifer liked people, made friends easily and avoided the rash judgments of flimsy first impressions. Was he just a jerk or maybe a nice guy having a bad day? Was the TV heavier than he let on, forcing him to concentrate more on hefting his burden than finding a clear path to his truck? Why did she even attempt plausible explanations for his callous behavior when her intuition told her this man spelled trouble? She'd steer clear of him if he appeared at other sales—or anywhere else for that matter!

Enough time wasted on this. She struggled to her van, stuffed the tree inside and took a tape measure from the box on the front seat. Checking the furniture measurements written this morning in her notebook, she locked the van's doors and returned to the sale. Now for a close look at what remained.

Her eyes darted across the jumbled sale items. There—the bench she'd noticed earlier! She whipped out her tape measure. Darn, too long for the mud room that needed seating space. She walked a last once-around the driveway, porch and garage.

Of the dozen shoppers here, she recognized several "Regulars" as she called them because of their frequent attendance at these sales. There was "Englishman," a quiet fellow concentrating on reusable construction materials and "Stevadore," a large man with an angular face and thick, white hair, who typically bought furniture. She'd observed him consigning some at the local Treasure Trove thrift shop and guessed he refurbished and sold pieces found at these sales.

She noticed "Duchess," a tall, elegant-looking middle aged woman with dark brown hair piled into a tall beehive atop her

head, who moved regally among the wares, fingering better quality jewelry, linens, china, silver and leather and buying upscale items.

Sometimes Jennifer saw friends or neighbors at these sales. For instance, that man with the curly black hair and scimitar-shaped scar on his lower left cheek. He looked familiar, but why – a distant neighbor, a clerk in a store she patronized, a waiter in one of the many local restaurants she and Jason frequented? She'd certainly seen him more than once!

Wait! A month ago at an estate sale, they passed on the stairs when she started down as he came up – and more recently, last week at a moving sale. Now it all came back: she'd seen him prior to that in Great Falls and again in Vienna. But wasn't something about him different then? She thought she remembered the scar but his hair... was her memory failing?

If a Regular, he needed a name. His cheek blemish reminded her of the dueling scars from centuries earlier when fencing was commonplace. Though not likely what disfigured this young man, Jennifer nevertheless chose "Swordsman."

Refocusing on the sale, she spotted a new-looking four-slice toaster, but did it work? She moved toward Seller who, without a calculator, attempted to total the prices of numerous items a Buyer handed her. As she waited in the check-out line, Jennifer's eyes surveyed the other shoppers to assure that the ill-mannered blond body-builder wasn't there. Mercifully, her turn came next.

"You have such great stuff that I'm back again!" Jennifer said to Seller, trying to sound cheerier than she felt. She held up the toaster. "What are you asking for this?"

"How about \$4.00?"

Great price, but Jennifer knew that purchasing used items cautioned "buyer beware." In their zeal to complete a sale, some Sellers couldn't resist stretching the truth a little and, unlike protocol for store purchases, you couldn't return faulty merchandise the next day. All electrical appliances invited testing, as did anything battery-operated. The cardboard box in her van held aids to cope with this need, such as light bulbs to test lamps, various batteries, a flashlight and screw drivers, together with rope to tie down the SUV's tailgate if something large had to stick out, a bungee cord, packaging tape, newspapers for wrapping glass or ceramics and a blanket/pillow combo to cushion fragile cargo.

"Do you mind plugging it in, please, to make sure it works?" Jennifer asked.

"I guess it is only fair to test it," Seller acknowledged, "although I didn't really set up for that..."

"Have you an extension cord or maybe there's an electrical outlet in the garage?"

"Let me think," said the bewildered Seller. "I'm pretty sure there's no plug in the garage. I... I guess you could try an outlet in the kitchen. I understand you want to be sure. Just go on in..."

"Thanks!" Jennifer hurried to the back of the garage, through the kitchen door into the house. "Hello," she called, not wanting to startle anyone inside. "Hello," she called again. Silence.

Plugging the toaster into the first outlet she saw, she depressed its plunger and watched closely as the coils inside glowed. Though grateful to test it out, she knew it risky for Seller to allow a stranger into her house unsupervised! Jennifer posed no problem, but others might. How could Seller know the difference? Should she share this thought or keep it to herself?

When the toaster popped its imaginary bread to the surface, she wrapped the cord around one hand and, gripping the appliance by the handles, hurried back outside.

"Thanks so much for letting me try it. It works perfectly. I'll take it." Jennifer fished \$4.00 from the purse fastened around her waist, paid Seller and then hesitated as several customers pressed forward to pay for their items.

Shielding her words from the others with a cupped hand, Jennifer whispered to Seller, "I just want to mention that it's probably not a good idea to let anyone into your house unless you or someone you trust is there. Good luck and I hope you do really well today."

Seller's startled gaze followed Jennifer down the driveway to her car, before other Buyers jostled forward, demanding check-out attention. Now she probably wonders if I took something—the messenger never wins, Jennifer thought! Still, the woman needed warning...

Jumping into her van, gunning the motor and simultaneously glancing at the notebook on the seat beside her, Jennifer placed a finger on the ad listing her next stop. Two garage sales on the same street and only a few minutes from her current location. As the

SUV's motor roared to life, she executed a remarkably close U-turn and sped down the street.

Jennifer's mind wandered as she drove, thinking that behind every garage sale lay a story. At the last house, the story was doubly unfortunate—an obviously painful divorce and a sorely needed, if poorly executed, sale of belongings. Jennifer sincerely hoped happiness lay somewhere in Seller's future.

But what was happiness anyway? If you couldn't achieve it in privileged and affluent McLean, Virginia, where the heck could you? The third world's desperate poor who scabbled in gritty poverty for daily survival surely imagined if they lived in safe and beautiful homes with plenty to eat they'd be happy forever. Yet she knew from newspaper accounts and neighborhood stories that the full gamut of crime—domestic abuse, child neglect, fraud, theft, arson and even murder—surfaced right here against McLean's backdrop of comfort and wealth!

She sighed as her thoughts turned again to the last Seller. If fifty percent of today's marriages ended in divorce, what future did that suggest for her five grown children, three of whom already had spouses? And what of the ups and downs in her own forty-year marriage to Jason?

Thinking of his familiar craggy face, balding head and warm grin, she smiled and then chuckled aloud as she drove. Somehow, they'd survived those frenetic early years together, enduring each other's foibles, building Jason's business and raising a big family. Now they found themselves sharing a particularly comfortable time with each other and with the life they'd shaped together.

As the congestion of parked cars just ahead signaled her upcoming destination, she pushed aside her thoughts to concentrate on finding a place to wedge her crossover. Since every sale reflected a story, what tale would unfold at this next stop?

CHAPTER 3

Jennifer maneuvered her car smoothly into an opening among the vehicles clustered in front of the next sale. The later on a Saturday morning, the more Buyers are awake and on the prowl! Knowing that choice stuff sells fast, she jumped out and hustled up the driveway.

An entirely different scenario here—these Sellers were NOT novices. The two of them seemed relaxed as they looked out confidently over their well organized, pre-priced merchandise.

Jennifer dodged through the large crowd of buyers to approach the comfortably seated sellers. “What a lot of effort you’ve put into getting ready for this!”

“You’re so right! We’re recently married and so we’re combining two households,” the man said pleasantly, beaming at his new bride. “For instance, I thought I had a lot of exceptional bachelor stuff, but I’m told now,” he winked at his wife, “it’s *inappropriate!*”

“Well,” added his wife, “besides the usual duplication we have some one-of-a-kind things that just couldn’t work in the new house,” she glanced at her husband mischievously.

“Such as?” Jennifer queried with friendly interest.

New Wife cradled a coffee cup in one hand and gestured with the other. “Such as everything on that side of the driveway from my husband’s old apartment! Such as that oil painting of a nude woman, coincidentally also an old girlfriend,” she shot her spouse a meaningful glance. “Such as all this ultra-modern black and

chrome living room furniture, the zebra rug and pillows, and all those chrome accessories. And," she wrinkled her nose, "and not least, such as these stacks of *Penthouse* and *Playboy* magazines."

"A fifteen-year classic collection of both," New Husband remarked wistfully, reminiscing as he riffled through one of the magazines. Dropping it back on the stack, he sighed. "Perfect for just the right guy."

The sign on the husband's orphaned items read:

COUCH - \$100

2 MATCHING CHAIRS - \$40 each

3 GLASS/CHROME COFFEE AND END TABLES - \$30 each

CHROME 4-PANEL ROOM DIVIDER - \$75

PAIR CHROME TABLE LAMPS - \$30 each

CHROME FLOOR LAMP - \$40

CHROME SHELVING - \$85

FRAMED ORIGINAL OIL PAINTING - \$100

MEN'S MAGAZINES \$1 each or all 360 for \$200

The painting caught Jennifer's eye right away. She'd immediately divined the bamboo tree's place in her living room, but where could she hang this intriguing art? She walked around the sale thinking this over before again returning to study the painting: a nude woman seated with her back to the artist, delicate flesh tones accentuating her hour-glass figure, her long, tawny hair cascading from the crown of her head down over her shoulders. Because of the subject's unseen face, the picture embodied every woman who had ever sat in that classic pose. She definitely wanted it, but where to display it? Her mind flipped through possible places in the house and then it came to her—their spacious master bathroom was the perfect location. But \$100?

Jennifer approached New Wife, "What's your best price for the old girlfriend you don't want."

"I especially want THAT to disappear today," New Wife confided. "Hey, make me an offer!"

"Okay, how about... um... \$50?"

"I think it's worth way more than that."

Jennifer smiled craftily, "Ah, but what is it worth to you to have this abomination gone forever?"

"Sold!" laughed New Wife. Jennifer paid her, awkwardly hefted the large painting as best she could and sidled slowly down the driveway with her oversized trophy.

Suddenly an obstacle blocked her way and a rough male voice commanded, "Put that down. It's mine!" Hardly a polite suggestion, this was an *order!*

"Pardon me?" Jennifer said politely, "I've just bought this and am taking it to my car." As she tried stepping ahead, her path was again blocked. Now she lowered the large frame slightly, her blue eyes barely peering over the top.

Those same blue eyes widened in shock as she stared directly into the face of the brawny, blond muscleman who'd crashed into her at the last sale—the man she'd vowed to avoid! A thick neck topped the tall man's square torso and the beady eyes in his obstinate face glared coldly straight down at Jennifer across the top of the picture frame. Only inches away from him now, she shuddered as her initial apprehension from that first sighting escalated into fear. Big and nasty, he reminded her of a wrestler, which confirmed this as the right name for him.

Wrestler barked at her, "I just bought everything listed on that sign from him," he pointed toward New Husband. "That means *all* of it—the furniture, magazines, lamps AND this picture."

Her logical mind commanded her to defuse this risky situation fast, but incongruously she did not. Summoning courage born of the conviction that she was in the right and reinforced by the illusion of safety with at least twenty people at the sale who could come to her rescue, to her surprise she said, "But I've already paid for this. I think that makes it mine!"

Wrestler's expression turned malevolent as his large, powerful hand encircled and squeezed her small wrist. He spoke in a measured, demanding voice. "I bought it and I'm taking it *now!*"

He was hurting her arm! Frozen, she still clung to the painting, unable to move away from this menace. Heads turned in the direction of their raised voices and New Husband hurried toward them.

Jennifer had already mentally hung the painting in the chosen room at home and knew that at these sales whoever paid first became the new owner! To her amazement she stubbornly repeated to New Husband, "I believe I bought it first and if so, I think it's mine."

Wrestler's face reddened as he fought for control. His arm muscles twitched, his fingers clasped and unclasped, his already thick neck seemed to swell as his frustration increased.

"Hey there," New Husband said to them both in a congenial, relaxed tone. "I bet we can work out this little misunderstanding. As you both can see, my wife and I are each trying to sell everything out here today and sometimes people come to us separately with offers." Turning to Jennifer, he continued. "I'm sorry but my wife made a mistake offering the painting to you. She didn't realize I'd already sold it to this guy. We really apologize to you for the confusion. Of course, we'll return your money. No harm done?"

"But money changed hands. I think it's mine!" Jennifer protested to New Husband, careful to avoid Wrestler's glare.

"May I talk to you privately for a moment over here?" New Husband asked Jennifer.

Carrying the painting with her, she walked a few guarded steps to the side with New Husband.

"Look," he said, "I understand that you like it, you paid for it and you want it, but here are three things to think about. First, you can understand that we hope to get the best price offered today for our stuff. That's just common sense. Wouldn't you feel the same way if you were giving this sale today? And you know he paid us twice as much as you did. Second, we can't know which of you bought it first. Let's imagine that my wife sold it to you at the same moment I sold it to him. You can't both take it – unless it's cut in half, which makes no sense. And third," he glanced toward Wrestler, "frankly, this guy makes me very uneasy. You know what I mean? What happens if we try to take it away from him?"

Peering sidelong at Wrestler, reluctantly, she *did* understand. His intransigent scowl, his body radiating bottled energy and his next move ominous and unpredictable, never mind that piercing

stare...A barrage of thoughts tumbled through Jennifer's mind. Was this the kind of nut who would follow her home, stalk her or the children, bash her car windows or poison her cat?

New Husband continued calmly, "Look, agreed, this isn't the outcome you'd like, but here is your money back with an extra five dollars," he pressed it into her hand, "and we'll make you the deal of a lifetime on anything else you buy here today. How does that sound?"

Vacillating, her focus flicked from New Husband to the glowering Wrestler and back again.

"This isn't fair," she said in a quiet voice to New Husband.

"No, it isn't. But it is a good decision," New Husband assured her, pressing the money into her pocket and gently easing the picture from her loosening fingers. "Now go look around and find some good stuff. Then see me for a REAL deal!"

Turning back to the sale, she tried to refocus yet couldn't help glancing sideways as Wrestler loaded his purchases into the black pickup truck, mercifully ignoring her. Relieved at his rapt absorption with his task, she realized now the idiotically stupid risk she'd taken. She had pledged to avoid him and instead confronted him! Madness! What was wrong with her today?

Still, she memorized his license plate number to record in the notebook in her car, an act giving her the illusion of a strategic edge: she knew his vehicle plate number but, thank goodness, he didn't know hers! Also this information doubled as insurance against any possible future trouble from him, in which case she could tell police exactly how to trace him.

Shaking these uncomfortable thoughts as best she could, Jennifer forced her attention back to the sale. Soon she noticed a bench which her tape measure confirmed fit her space perfectly. With a little paint and simple upholstery she could turn this into a decorator piece to transform her mudroom in a practical yet custom way. The tag read \$20.

Looking around, she observed that Wrestler's truck was gone. Relieved, she lugged the bench and some other small items into the line of buyers to pay New Husband for their purchases.

When Jennifer's turn came, New Husband patted her arm and without even cataloging her items said, "You just take these with our compliments. No charge at all! And again, I'm sorry for what

happened earlier. But that guy was, well, strange! You know what I mean?"

"Here's your \$5 bribe back," she said with a twinkle, "and thanks for your kind offer, but of course I'll pay for my purchases," and when she insisted, New Husband finally agreed. Jennifer continued, "That dreadful guy had no sense of humor at all, but clearly you do!"

New Husband chuckled appreciatively, "God knows I try, and I admit that bachelor stuff held warm memories for me. But my future's going to be way better than the past." He glanced happily toward New Wife, busy selling items on the other side of the yard.

Jennifer started to leave, but on impulse turned back. "I've been thinking about the way you handled that situation with the painting and I must ask – what do you do in real life?"

New Husband threw back his head and broke into a hearty laugh. "Funny you should ask! I'm a professional mediator."

CHAPTER 4

Checking her watch, Jennifer realized with regret that only 20 minutes remained to shop if she were to return home by 9 a.m. as planned. She pulled into the knot of cars at the next sale and parked quickly.

Three gloomy middle-aged couples conducted this sale. They'd neatly categorized and priced the items around them, but these dejected Sellers were not happy campers.

"This represents a *whole* lot of work," Jennifer commiserated, surveying the scene.

"Yeah, but not because we wanted to," said the woman in orange. "After Mama died, Daddy just couldn't keep on by himself. He forgot to pay bills, so the utilities got turned off a couple of times and he blazed up a few pots of food on the stove. We were afraid he'd set the house afire and burn himself to a bacon-crisp if we hadn't finally put a stop to it by finding him a nursing home."

"Assisted living," corrected the tired-looking man in green, who wore a straw hat.

The woman in yellow said, "It's been a nightmare going through all their things, and were they ever savers: old bills, receipts and magazines dating back fifty years! Besides all we put out for this sale, there's a ton more to go through inside before we can sell the house. Because some of us grew up here, that's yet another nightmare." Yellow sighed heavily.

The man in the red shirt glanced at the other two. "Lucky for us, Reba knows all about giving garage sales, which saved us a pile of money because those estate sale folks charge a bundle to do it for you."

Orange said, "We had a devil of a time pricing stuff because we're not from around here and not real sure what's right for these parts. So if the price doesn't look right, make us an offer."

About fifteen other shoppers milled around now. Spotting Swordsman again, Jennifer watched him peripherally. What set him apart from the other shoppers? Not focused on the sale's merchandise like everybody else, instead he looked around the house and yard as if in the first upscale residence he'd ever seen. Nor did he fit the bored husband stereotype— one dutifully accompanying his shopper wife but with no shred of interest himself. No, Swordsman seemed alert to the surroundings, but if not a shopper or the spouse of one, then why repeatedly visit these sales? An architect looking for new ideas? That seemed farfetched.

Was she just edgy from her earlier encounter with Wrestler? Once suspicion clouds your mind your perceptions change. Different from the in-her-face prickly danger radiated by Wrestler, Swordsman's unlikely behavior triggered her curiosity— something *odd* about him!

Enough. Didn't curiosity kill the cat? Her smile faded. She *was* that curious cat!

As if reading her interest, Swordsman turned to look directly at her and their gazes locked. To break this uncomfortable contact, she consulted her watch— her time was running out!

Ignoring Swordsman now, she stepped forward for a better overview of the sale. Her glance moved across the merchandise, stopped, then riveted. Could it be true? At the end of the far table sat a collection of Blue Danube china! She could hardly contain her excitement!

Years ago, she inherited her mother's Blue Danube place settings for eight and using it brought back warm childhood memories. Adding extra settings to accommodate her large family was easy back when it sold open-stock in department stores. But the now-discontinued pattern was no longer available retail, even though breakage and chips required frequent new additions. A company called Replacements, Inc. charged dearly since the current demand exceeded the existing supply, forcing the price up. Now occasional

lucky finds still occurred at antique and thrift shops or estate and garage sales.

She moved swiftly past the other displays to the table. There they were! Turning the gravy boat upside down, she verified the maker's mark on the bottom. Calm, be calm! Check each piece for chips, cracks, maker's mark and price. The gravy boat sticker read \$10, salt and pepper \$7, candle sticks \$5 each, filigree serving dish \$15, cream and sugar \$15, cake plate \$15, jelly jar \$5, pitcher \$10, coffee pot \$15—and all in mint condition. She felt pricks of adrenalin rush down her arms to her fingertips as she gently eased past another shopper who reached for one of the pieces.

"Excuse me," she smiled politely at the shopper, "but I'm already buying these," and then a bit louder to Yellow and Red, "Would you please help me collect them and wrap them up for me?"

Yellow hurried to assist. "Well, they sure are pretty little blue and white dishes, aren't they? You want them all?"

"Yes, please. Was this part of a whole set of china?" Jennifer probed.

"Well now, a lot of it sold about 30 minutes ago but I think another piece is still inside the house unless Reba's keeping it—a sort of casserole dish with a cover on it. Let me ask her about it."

Jennifer wondered at the connection between the upscale items at this handsome house and the folksy heirs unloading them. Certainly a story here, but probably not one learned diplomatically. With an important purchase in progress she must not risk alienating them, despite her curiosity.

A moment later Blue walked over to Jennifer. "You the one interested in more of these dishes?"

"Well yes, I might be. I..." Jennifer hoped her voice didn't reveal her true passion as she made a Herculean effort at casualness. "I sort of like blue and white and think I *might* be able to find a place for some of them," she somehow managed.

"Seems like you sure love dishes! While they're wrapping up your other things, come on in the house with me to take a look at it, but I don't know for sure yet if it's for sale."

Nearly trembling, Jennifer followed Blue into the house, through the box-strewn kitchen to the cluttered dining room with paintings stacked against a wall. And there it was. Jennifer couldn't

suppress a sharp intake of breath. To cover this betrayal, she faked a small cough.

Like a museum piece atop the credenza sat the graceful Blue Danube soup tureen, a replica of the emperor's own Meissen original. She'd often ogled its photo in the brochure. Steadying herself against the door jam, she felt her pulse race. What pleasure to gaze upon this beautiful piece, never mind the intoxicating possibility of *owning* it! How could she persuade Blue to let it go?

"Oh, my," Jennifer whispered. "Looks like your mother owned a lot of nice things."

Rather than accepting the intended compliment, Blue's face became even sterner. "Actually, she's my husband's mother, not mine. He's sitting outside there with the rest of us, the one in green, wearing the straw hat. Yes, she did have a lot of right pretty dishes and statues and such, but just between us she always acted real snooty."

Doubting its wisdom, Jennifer risked a curious, "Oh?"

"Yep, she was always uppity with me, like I wasn't good enough for her son. Tried to like her but just never could. My dander went up every time she put me down: how I set a table, the way I cooked, the music I liked, how I dressed. Truth is, I'm not real sorry she's finally gone."

Thinking of no discreet response, Jennifer instead reached for the tureen. "May I?"

"Here, let me do it for you," Blue responded protectively. "This here is the lid, and this is the bowl part. I'll turn it over for you because I saw you doing that with the other pieces outside. And that's the big saucer that sits under it." Blue replaced the tureen and its parts on the credenza. "And this here is the dipper," she held up the soup ladle.

"Did I understand you to say this is for sale?" Jennifer inquired politely.

"Maybe, but first I want to see how much you like it, cause that would mean you'd pay... I mean, you'd take real good care of it. And next, I'd be asking a lot for it because I'm just as happy to keep it myself. So I might sell it to you but not for less than..." she'd pick an outrageous price, doubting anyone foolish enough to buy it for that, "not for less than \$100," she said smugly.

"A hundred dollars? I... is that your best price?"

"Not a penny less. Yep, that's it, take it or leave it," said Blue with finality.

Jennifer frowned, "Then I guess...I guess I'll take it!"

Surprise spread across Blue's face. What kind of place was this McLean, Virginia? Who ever heard of paying that much for a darned old dish, even one with three parts and a dipper? Should she have asked more? A crafty expression flickered across her face. "I meant to say \$125."

"But you just offered it to me for \$100 and I agreed."

"Yes, I know that but I made a mistake. And we don't take checks!" Blue warned.

"I understand about preferring cash, but... well, I mean... you changed the deal."

"Yes, I did, but I'm just as happy to keep that casserole myself. And they need me outside! Do you want it or not?"

Jennifer stared at the tureen. Explaining this impulse purchase to Jason would require creativity. But just look at it—she might never ever stumble upon another such chance! Straightening with decision she said, "I'll take it."

"You got the money with you?"

"Yes, in the car."

"Better get it and pay me then before I even carry it outside the house," Blue added with caution.

Hurrying outside, Jennifer whispered to herself over and over: Don't let her change her mind! *Please*, don't let her change her mind!

Five minutes later, with the packaged Blue Danube china braced safely in cardboard boxes on the van's floor, she gloated. Even if you were lucky enough to *find* them, these pieces cost more than double what she just paid and the four-part tureen more yet!

Euphoric, Jennifer turned toward home!

CHAPTER 5

Her time-sensitive jaunt finished and aglow with her success at the sales, Jennifer relaxed on the drive home. Gliding past the well-kept McLean houses surrounded by manicured lawns, she reflected that this community “showed” well today just as it had twenty-five years ago when Jason’s new job first prompted their springtime visit to the Washington, D.C. area.

After a week of fruitless house-hunting but still seeking a roomy, affordable home for their five young children, they extended their search to a Virginia suburb of D.C. called McLean. That morning their agent showed them a house new on the market—colonial-style on a quiet cul-de-sac where springtime flowers splashed glorious colors across the yard. With a large yard bordered behind by wooded park land for their kids to explore, two blocks from pool and tennis and three blocks from an outstanding Fairfax County elementary school, this property seemed *perfect*. But the cost! Would they sacrifice the kids’ college funds to buy it? They moved in a week later.

Jennifer smiled. Despite a tight budget in those early days, time proved this decision wise. Their family thrived in this congenial neighborhood and the property’s price quadrupled in the intervening twenty-five years. Eventually, they financed their children through college after all.

Nearing home, Jennifer snapped out of her reverie, pressed the remote control to open the iron driveway gates, maneuvered the

van through the tall brick columns on either side, pressed a second remote to open the garage door and drove inside. Jumping out of her SUV, she picked up the toaster, piled an armful of her other purchases atop it and hustled them into the house.

She found Jason drinking coffee and reading the newspaper on the long glass-enclosed sun porch covering the entire back of their house. "Hello, Hon," she called. "Are the children up yet?"

"Just me, but I heard the shower, so at least one's awake." Jason looked up from the paper and added, "The girls usually sleep late like all college kids—lucky if we see them before noon. Aren't you home sooner than usual?"

"Becca's summer job interview is this morning. Her car's in the shop so she asked to borrow mine because you need yours for golf at ten."

Though eager to tell him about her buys, she knew function equaled desirability to her engineer husband: something to *use* ranked higher than something to *see*. So she needed to apply some finesse. Ignoring his skeptical frown, she held up two sturdy garden trowels and said, "Here's something for you! Didn't your last one break yesterday? They're new and only a dollar each!"

"Great," he said without enthusiasm, but she knew he'd garden with them before the day ended.

"And a lot of 'smalls' plus these nice earrings!" She pointed to her earlobes. "The clip-on's I wear are nearly impossible to find retail any more. And a bamboo tree that will look stunning in the living room and a bench for the seating we need in the mudroom."

He grunted and lowered his eyes back to the paper. "Need help bringing anything in?"

"Thanks, Jay. Just the tree and bench." She poured herself some coffee, wanting to share what weighed uppermost on her mind: the scary encounters with Wrestler! But she hesitated. This would worry him and maybe further dampen his marginal enthusiasm for her garage sale hobby. She valued his love and protectiveness, but why alarm him with information that might elicit strong objections or even challenge her cherished independence?

And in the unlikely event she ever saw Wrestler again, she'd *really* avoid him this time! Since most garage sale buyers had specific goals, such as replacing a lamp or a chair, they shopped no more after achieving their objective. Regulars like her were the exception, not the rule.

Jennifer's own garage sale experience began as a practical shopping choice when her children were young and the new-house budget tight. Later, this habit blossomed into genuine treasure-hunting because people sell what people have. Wealthy McLean and surrounds offered excellent "gently used" merchandise and finding quality bargains is ever popular, as perpetual sales at retail stores and car lots prove. She'd found many unusual and useful items to benefit her home, her life-style and her family; and the sale "stories" intrigued her.

She knew long established markets existed for "used" houses with several previous owners, for "pre-owned cars" and for antique shops where merchandise is necessarily second-hand. Garage and estate sales were the same idea. Since Wrestler had likely completed his shopping, little probability existed for their paths to cross again. Regulars like Jennifer looked for fun, adventure, practical finds and unique treasures...not trouble.

So unlike what was actually on her mind, she asked her husband, "Find any interesting news in the morning paper? I only grabbed the classified section earlier to locate the sales."

"Ways to solve Old Dominion Drive traffic congestion," he droned, "a new store at Tysons Corner; critique of a new local restaurant, a burglary in Great Falls and another in Woodlea Hills..."

"Woodlea Hills! That's just down the road. We'd better lock our doors religiously. I must be sure to alert the girls about that. Anything else?"

"Another McLean woman is missing."

Jennifer looked up sharply. "Don't I remember headlines about a teenager disappearing a month ago? What ever happened with that case?"

"Don't think she turned up—maybe a runaway? Who knows better than we do what parents face raising kids these days."

"Hey, I didn't know you had five in mind when we married!" she needed.

He stifled a smile. "If I'd known about the five I might not have proposed." Seeing her raised eyebrow, he conceded, "Well, *maybe*..." He winked and she strolled over to kiss his cheek.

"Okay, break it up, you two!" Daughter Becca strolled into the kitchen dressed for her upcoming appointment. "Coffee seriously needed!"

Jennifer gestured toward the coffee pot. "Ready and waiting for you. Good morning, Sweetie! Not quite awake yet?"

"Barely! Thanks for coming back early, Mom. Any garage sale goodies for show-and-tell?"

"Well, funny you should ask! *Hold onto your hat!*" Jennifer smiled and bustled away to her car in the garage.

Jason groaned. "Oh no! When she says '*hold-on-to-your-hat,*' years of experience tell me I'm in for a fast ride. I fear that phrase! What wild and crazy thing did she find this time?"

Becca laughed. "Dad, how can she still shock you after more than forty years together?"

"Shock hardly covers it! Life with your mom isn't boring, but that phrase *always* means steeling myself for a major jolt!"

"While she's still out in the garage, Dad, does she suspect anything about tomorrow?"

"No, I think we're really going to surprise her!"

Moments later, Jennifer reappeared and placed the bulky newspaper-wrapped bundle housing the tureen on the kitchen counter. She'd sneak the other Blue Danube pieces into the china cabinet later, confident Jason wouldn't notice those additions once ensconced.

As she pulled away the wrapping, Jason sat bolt upright, his eyes on the tureen and his voice rising an octave. "Oh geez, I'm afraid to ask the cost of that *glorified soup bowl.*"

Anticipating his bluster, Jennifer purred, "Look, today is the last day ever that I'm fifty-nine years old. Tomorrow is the big six-oh! Isn't this the ideal birthday present for me, Jason?"

Now he pushed back from the table, cast long-suffering eyes toward the ceiling and whistled a loud note. "The price must be a whopper because you just pulled out the big cannons."

She chuckled and lightly kissed his forehead. "Thank you, honey; it's *exactly* what I wanted most." She smiled so happily and Jason moaned in such painful mock distress that they all had to laugh.

As Jennifer handed her the car keys, Becca giggled and pointed to the new tureen. "Bet I can guess what we're having for lunch."

"You're exactly right!" her mother confirmed, "...and sandwiches, too!"

CHAPTER 6

Jason grinned at how willingly their grown children embraced his surprise party idea for Jennifer's 60th birthday. The Blue Danube tureen aside, he thought a party at home with her loved ones gathered was the perfect gift for his dear wife, who doted on her family.

All their married children lived within a two hours' drive, remarkable in today's mobile society. Hannah, Becca and their close friend Tina MacKenzie had whisked Jennifer away to morning garage sales on the pretext of furnishing the college apartment the girls would share in the fall. They pledged to return her at noon, their arrival signaling the birthday feast to begin. Meantime, the "fam," with their spouses and the Grands, began arriving at the house late-morning, bringing covered dishes for the event.

Brown-haired Tina MacKenzie visited the Shannon girls so often—for meals, overnights, video-watching, studying and celebrations—that her presence seemed as normal as if she were just another child of their family. Quiet and friendly but more serious and reserved than the Shannon girls, Tina recently always wore the same unusual gold filigree dangling earrings.

As with many of Jennifer's astute observations, Jason hadn't noticed this until his wife pointed it out. "Her dad brought the earrings to her from his last trip to China. When he had the heart attack and died only a week after returning, Tina began wearing them constantly in his memory. Her dad's death hit her very hard

and widowhood's tough for her mother to shoulder, too." Then, with eyes full of tears, Jen said to him, "I can't even imagine life without *you*, Jay!"

Gently pushing that memory aside, Jason basted more sauce onto chicken marinating in two big pans, about to take them outside when he heard, "Here, Dad, let me help with that." His twenty-eight-year-old son Mike offered as they each carried a large pan out to the patio grill.

"And where's Bethany?"

"My wife is picking up the cake and should return any minute now." Kaela swept past them, jostling scissors and an armful of fresh-cut flowers from the garden. "Dad, do you know where Mom's vases are?"

"In the laundry room cupboards. Here, I'll show you," Jason said. "Be back in a minute, Mike."

After producing the vase, Jason closed the laundry room door on the noisy crowd for a quiet moment, grateful that his children seemed grounded and happy, except perhaps for Hannah.

Five months ago Hannah discovered the boy she dated exclusively through six years of high school and early college had multiple other love affairs going during that same time. At a party she attended with college girlfriends, a stunned Hannah stumbled upon Kevin kissing his newest "squeeze."

As Hannah's beau, Kevin had been welcomed into their home for years. His deception startled them all, but the betrayal broke Hannah's heart. She closed herself in her room for days. When the crying finally stopped, she emerged haggard, depressed and disillusioned.

"I'll never trust my own judgment... or any man... again," she sobbed against her father's shoulder when he tried consoling her.

"Hannah, Hannah. Honey, time *does* heal; broken hearts can mend to love again and judgment grows from experiences like this one. Someday you'll find just the right trustworthy guy, I promise. They do exist, you know!" He looked into her tear-filled eyes.

"Oh, Daddy," she wailed, "why couldn't Kevin be like you?"

"We're all who we are! And some good may come out of this if Kevin realizes his behavior cost him a wonderful girl and he decides to change that behavior. You've moved past someone who didn't share your expectations and freed yourself to find someone who does, someone you can respect and who feels the same about you."

Wiping a tear from her cheek, Hannah asked, "Is that how it is for you and Mom?"

This unexpected question from his twenty-year-old daughter caught him by surprise. Blowing her nose into the handkerchief he'd handed her, Hannah didn't notice his smile grow as he reflected upon how he and Jennifer had stretched, changed, grown and merged in their forty-one years together. Some coincidental mix of intelligence and humor miraculously buoyed them through those harried years of marital adjustment and child-raising. Overcoming rough patches and sharing precious moments forged them together, so that now they felt closer than ever. "Yes it is that way for us," he answered honestly. Hannah seemed comforted, whether by her parents' affection or by his honesty, he wasn't sure which.

Intuitively, he thought Hannah would survive this temporary shock and hurt, land on her feet, emerge wiser for weathering the difficult lesson and some day reach for love again. He reminded himself that people heal differently, but five months of this sadness did seem a *long* time....

Jason returned to the dining room in time to hear a six-year-old Grand shout, "Auntie Bethany brought the birthday cake," as the youngster rocketed past the table on his way out to the back yard goldfish pond. A fancy chocolate cake with "Happy Birthday, Jennifer" frosted across the top dominated one end of the buffet table; and, if not 60, a large number of candles promised a warm glow.

The front door opened as Dylan and family arrived, with plans to stay several days to visit local museums. After hugs all around, they hustled their suitcases to appointed bedrooms and returned to the main floor just as a scout at the front window ran through the house calling, "She's here, quick, she's here!"

Stopping tasks and conversations, parents herded their children together into the dining room where numerous young Grands danced around in barely-contained anticipation. They listened as the automatic garage door droned open to admit Jennifer's car. Kaela whispered loudly to the group, "Okay, everyone, this is it! Get ready. It's *party* time!" Seconds later, the door from the garage to the house opened and Jennifer stepped in, followed closely by the three girls. Startled at the unexpected crowd in her house, she stopped in her tracks, amazement showing in her wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression.

The room echoed as shouts of "Surprise!" erupted in various octaves. Jennifer stood transfixed in the open doorway, a widening smile animating her face as a lively high-low chorus of voices launched into an off-key but enthusiastic rendition of "Happy-Birthday-To-You."

Delighted, she touched Jason's arm. "I'll bet you masterminded this, you rascal," she whispered to him and joked to the group, "Can't sudden shocks like this level a tottering 60-year old?"

"Speech, speech," someone called.

Emotional now, she managed to say, "I must be the luckiest person on Earth to have all of you in my life. Sharing this day with me is the very best possible present. Thank you! Thank you!" Approving hoots, foot stomping and whistles followed from the crowd.

Emerging from an impromptu conference with his siblings, Dylan stepped forward. "Mom, this gift is from all your children, but since I'm the oldest they want me to present it." He read the tag attached to a colorfully wrapped package, "For the woman who already has almost everything, here's one thing she doesn't." He handed her the box.

Fumbling the wrapping open, she drew out a metal rectangle and held it up for all to see. "YRDSALE" said the vanity license plate for her car. She burst into appreciative laughter and the rest joined in.

"Virginia doesn't allow enough spaces to spell out both words, so we had to abbreviate!" chirped another Grand, twelve-year-old Rachel.

"This is perfect! There'll be no hiding my madness from the world now."

"Time to eat!" Mike called, hustling to the barbeque to wield tongs transferring chicken from grill to serving platter. Lunch proceeded with noisy exuberance, followed by candle-lighting of the cake, wish-making and a circle of excited grandchildren helping Jennifer blow out the tiny flames. Afterward, the adults relaxed to talk together while the children played outside.

During a lull in activity, Tina approached Jennifer. "Mrs. Shannon, I have a little present for you also, to celebrate your birthday and to thank you for welcoming me so often into your home."

Touched, Jennifer hugged Tina, thanked her and opened the small gift box. Inside sat a tiny red cloisonné frog. Reading Jennifer's puzzled expression, Tina explained, "Shopping for someone like you is hard because you already have so many unusual things, but frogs are good luck omens in the Orient. Red is also a good fortune color there, so it's a double dose! My dad brought this one from China. It's small enough to carry with you as a little talisman. I hope you like it."

"Oh, Tina, thank you so very much. What an original present! You can be sure I'll cherish it because it comes from you and because nobody can have too much good luck! Look, I'm putting it into my pocket right this minute. He's on duty as of now!"

A little later, Kaela took her mother aside. "Mom, I'd like to have a garage sale next weekend but my house is too far away. Your address is a better draw if we could have it in your driveway. The other girls want to join in and we thought you'd probably have some things to contribute from your stash in the garage. We'd do everything: put the ad in the newspaper, put up signs and clean up afterward. Even the Grands could sell toys they're bored with at their own little tables."

Jennifer looked doubtful, "Remember two years ago how much work that last one was? Are you sure you want to take this on by yourselves?" Bethany, Kaela and Becca all nodded.

"Then if Dad doesn't mind, it's fine with me. And you're right," she added with a twinkle, "I certainly do have a few items to contribute!"

CHAPTER 7

Delighted that Dylan's family stayed on after her party, Jennifer marveled at how quickly their three-day visit sped by. She still felt the damp farewell kisses from little Asa, Christopher, Ethan and Gabe. Such cute little Grands! But after their noise and energy, returning to quiet, normal routines also had definite rewards. Win-win, Jennifer thought.

When the phone rang, she rushed from folding sheets in the laundry room to get the call before the answering machine kicked in. "Hello," she said.

"Jennifer Shannon?" a male voice asked and when she acknowledged that she was, he continued, "This is Ronnie Williams over at Forensic Labs. Remember me?"

"Of course I do! How could anyone work at the lab for three years and not remember you, Ronnie? What's new?"

"Pretty much the same except Heather, who we hired when you left, must start maternity leave next week... sooner than expected, doctor's orders. So, we wonder if you might like to temp for her during the two months she's gone. Returning short term might fit your schedule and since you already know the business office routine, we wouldn't have to train someone new. What do you think?"

Jennifer mused, "Interesting, Ronnie. You know I left only because I didn't want full time work any more. How many days a week?"

"We could probably get by with four because, if I remember, you work like a house afire!"

She laughed, " Well, I like keeping busy! Four days a week for two months sounds possible."

They discussed salary and recent office chatter about other employees she knew. "This is a tentative 'yes' but I want to discuss it with Jason first. I'll call you back within the hour! And Ronnie, thanks for thinking of me for this job!"

"Jennifer, I'm always thinking about you!"

"You're incorrigible!"

"I try to be."

How pleasant! She warmed to the idea of working again in the lab's business office—a stimulating environment, pleasant staff, extra income for her garage sale mischief and... how nice to be wanted back. Ronnie, the office manager, hadn't changed a bit: still flirty but in the nice way, not the harassment way.

Jason encouraged her to do what she wanted, so she and Ronnie decided she'd start on Monday.

Smiling at this unexpected surprise, Jennifer poured a cup of coffee and sank into a chair in the quiet kitchen. Realizing she hadn't looked at the morning newspaper, she opened the *Washington Post*. A few pages inside the first section, an article immediately drew her attention: a burglary in nearby McLean Hunt. She attended a sale in that neighborhood just a week ago and something about the address looked familiar!

On impulse, she found her garage sale notebook, flipped pages until she located the McLean Hunt sale and compared the house number to the newspaper information. An exact match! She cut out and dated the newspaper article. Didn't Jason mention a robbery in Woodlea Hills last Saturday when she returned from sales with the soup tureen? Rushing to the newspapers stacked in her garage for recycling, she pulled out the previous weekend's *Washington Post* and *Times*.

Paging through, she found Jason's article and checked it against addresses from the last few weeks in her notebook. Comparing the Woodlea Hills address in the paper to her notebook, she couldn't believe it: another match!

The newspapers in her garage went back about a month. Dragging them inside, she began with recent dates, looking for a very specific type of news article. When she glanced at the clock, an