

Prologue

May 16

Monday 3 a.m.

The light of the half-moon couldn't conquer the city lights and reach the darkened building. A light pole topped with a halogen lamp stood more than half a block away. The small puddle of dirty-white light barely scratched the surrounding area. At this hour in the morning, Seattle belonged to the homeless and the drunks and the gangs

This area of Aurora Avenue, however, clung to a desperate civility and the gangs and the whores weren't very interested in it. Consequently, the night lay undisturbed, except for a homeless man sleeping in a doorway, cuddling his wine bottle. Two figures dressed in dark clothes and full-face ski masks climbed out of an old beater car that hung onto the dull shine of some dark color.

Gravel from the small parking lot crunched beneath their shoes as they made their way to the back door of A Woman's Place. With a swift kick, the jamb gave way and the door

swung inward. The two strode inside with only the blank faces of commercial buildings and sleeping apartment buildings encircling the women's center to witness the invasion.

As the smaller figure headed through the double doors leading from the kitchen to the open area in front, the sound of breaking dishes filled the air.

After a while, the person walked from the kitchen into the open area and set down three gallon jugs of blood. Ski mask rolled up to the forehead, hands propped on hips, a scowl marred the ordinary face. "This is a piss poor job! What's wrong with you? You love sand niggers?" Booted feet stomped a plastic truck and gloved hands tore the head from a baby doll then flung it down.

"No! You know I don't, but the kids..." Panicked eyes flashed to the smashed toys.

The back of a hand lashed across the protester's cheek. The skin on the cheekbone split and a trickle of blood ran from the wound. "They're as much a sand nigger as their mommas and daddies. The only way to get rid of lice, my daddy said, was to kill the nits. Get this blood splashed around; and do a decent job this time."

Once the jugs were empty, the two figures tossed them to the floor and headed toward the kitchen. The double doors from the

kitchen swung open and an elderly woman walked in.

Dark eyes blazed from a walnut brown face. She studied the pale faces not yet hidden again behind the rolled up ski masks. “You’ve done evil this night. May Allah have....”

Before the old woman completed the sentence, a fist slammed into her face. Her cheekbone shattered from the impact as she fell toward the sharp corner of one of the children’s broken tables.

Chapter 1

May 16

Monday 6:30 p.m.

The sun crept up behind the buildings surrounding A Woman’s Place, rimming them with a slightly golden halo. With the temperature close to fifty-six degrees and a cloudless blue sky it promised to be a pleasant day. Ahead of Zahair Abidi, a crowded metro bus squealed to a halt at the bus stop a few feet away from the plate glass windows of the one-story, beige stucco building. More people

squeezed onboard as Zahair eased around the bus.

She frowned as she drove past the front of A Woman's Place. *I'm certain I forgot to let down the blind on the far right when I closed up; worried about it until I finally went to bed last night, but now it's down. Oh, well, all that worry for nothing. I must've gone back and closed it after talking to Randy when he delivered the milk.*

With a flick of her turn signal, she entered the narrow alley between the center and an abandoned grocery store. The small gravel lot in back offered parking to the staff of A Woman's Place. A four-foot tall cyclone fence enclosed the other two-thirds of the building's extra-large lot space. It held a patch of grass, a swing set, a slide, and a sandbox for the children in the daycare that A Woman's Place ran.

As she swung her compact car into its marked spot, Zahair's eyes flashed to the dumpster next to the back door, but the old woman wasn't sleeping next to the metal bin this morning. *She probably found some place else to sleep last night. Hope she comes to breakfast a little bit later. I worry so about her.*

Nonexistent spiders crawled across her neck and she peered around. Lately, at the

oddest moments, she felt invisible eyes watching her. Pushing away the uncomfortable thought, she hopped out, grabbed her purse, and dug through it for the center's keys as she walked to the kitchen door. Keys in hand, she lifted her eyes to the deadbolt and froze. The doorjamb around the lock had been split. The door hung open a fraction of an inch.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. From the front of the building, a bus pulled away from the curb. She stifled the sudden urge to race out to the sidewalk and flag it down. With one finger, she shoved against the door. It opened on well-oiled hinges. Straining, she listened for the slightest sound. Silence. She shook off the unnamed dread that chased goosebumps down her arms. Easing the door wide, she slipped inside.

The ordered kitchen lay in disarray. Stainless steel pots from the overhead rack scattered across the once-immaculate tile floor. The refrigerator hummed, its door gaping. Half-gallons of milk meant to feed the daycare children had been flung across the room. The waxed cartons had split. Puddles of dingy white gathered in the worn spots on the floor.

She stepped forward. Her foot slipped on a paper plate. A gasp burst from between dry

lips as she caught her balance. Pieces of elbow macaroni crunched beneath her shoes. A dented can rolled from the touch of her toe. Shards--from their few plates, cups, and glasses--glittered in the light sneaking in through the back door. Cook's most proud possession, a set of kitchen knives gifted by a store in Seattle, lay amid the detritus.

Biting her lower lip, she held the cry of despair inside her. Caution weighed every step as she shuffled through the spacious kitchen, nudging aside the dented pots and pans, the cooking utensils, and the remnants of the carefully hoarded food.

At the swinging double doors that led into the main room, she halted. The pulse in her throat ramped up. She sucked in a deep breath and mustered her courage. One hand grasping her keys like a weapon, she pushed open the left door.

A sob tore from her throat. Her hand flew to her mouth to hold in the wail of despair that threatened to crash through the spacious room. Slowly, her eyes registered the shattered tables, the smashed toys, the holes in the plasterboard walls so recently painted a vibrant blue, and the blood. So much blood. Dark red streaks smeared across the walls; reddish-brown puddles hardened on the scuffed wood floor. It appeared that what

remained of the furnishings had been doused with blood. The smell gagged her. Her stomach flip-flopped

Someone had dragged in black, plastic garbage bags from the dumpster by the rear door. Egg shells, discarded vegetables, Styrofoam meat trays, empty milk cartons, and crumpled paper towels, lay strewn across the room. The reek of rancid food vied with the rotting odor of blood.

She swallowed hard and prayed for strength, for courage. Still, she couldn't force her feet to move. Her mind sluggishly tried to process the scene. Tears stung her eyes. She blinked them away. Inhaling a jagged breath, her stomach nearly retched. She reprimanded herself. This was no time to give in to weakness.

All of the blinds were closed. Sunlight, she needed sunlight. With the cloth of her hijab over her nose and mouth to filter out some of the stench, she shuffled forward. From the corner of her eye, in front of what was left of one of the children's tables, she noted a pile of black rags. More garbage, she thought. Then the black rags moved and a low moan issued from them.

Monday morning Sergeant Nita Slowater of the Special Crimes Team—AKA SCaT--

was halfway across the bridge on Highway 2, squinting against the sun glinting off the back window of the car in front of her, when she received the call. Heavy commuter traffic forced her to stick the cherry on top her vehicle.

She parked across the sidewalk beside the crime scene tape as EMTs hustled a gurney into the ambulance. Molly the Pack Lady's face flashed into her mind and her stomach clenched. She missed the elderly, homeless artist nearly as much as she missed her own father. Inside A Woman's Place, she hustled over to Mike. "What did the EMTs say?"

The bitter chocolate face of Lieutenant Michael Williams, head of the Special Crimes Team, pinched in anger. "She's unconscious with a large bruise on her face, a probable shattered cheekbone, and a deep gash on the back of her head." He tipped his chin toward the corner of a broken child's table. "Best guess—someone hit her and she fell backward and hit that table. Vitals are pretty weak; she's old and she's malnourished." Deep chocolate eyes blazed as he surveyed the destruction. Big-knuckled hands fisted at his sides.

Carolyn Upington, head of the crime scene investigation team assigned to SCaT, snapped on nitrile gloves as she strode over to them. "This is a freaking mess. Hope you aren't in a

hurry because this will take all day—if not longer—to gather evidence and process the scene.”

Leaving the two of them to talk, Nita headed across the room, dodging dried puddles of blood and mounds of rubble. Halfway across the room, she nearly tramped on a small doll. Sorely tempted to pick it up and set it somewhere safe, she shoved her hands in the pockets of her slacks, even though it wrinkled the front panel of the sharply-creased material.

The back half of the building housed a large kitchen with institutional-size, stainless steel refrigerator, freezer, and a cook stove with a restaurant-type grill next to it. A prep island cut the room in half. Above it hung a rack for the restaurant-size, stainless steel pots and pans scattered across the floor. She scanned the room until her eyes came to rest on a thin woman with olive skin huddled near the open door with an officer in attendance. The woman stared outside as if she simply couldn't bear to face the destruction inside.

Whatever else this place does, it must feed tons of people. She consciously slowed her steps. Not wanting to crowd the woman, she stopped a couple of feet away from the victim. “Ms. Abidi?”

Abidi twisted her head to look over her shoulder. Haunted brown eyes met Nita's before she turned her gaze back toward the outside without speaking.

With a tip of her head, Nita instructed the officer next to Abidi. "Go around the building and help keep the rubberneckers and the press away from the scene." After the officer left, she closed part of the gap between them. "Ms. Abidi...am I pronouncing that correctly?"

The woman cleared her throat. "Yes, that is correct."

"I'm Sergeant Slowater." A flick of her finger opened a small, spiral-bound notebook. The click of the pen sounded loud. "I need to ask you some questions."

Weariness weighted Abidi's voice and bowed her shoulders. "Ask your questions, Sergeant, though I doubt if my answers will help you stop this kind of hate."

"Tell me about A Woman's Place."

For a moment, the veil of despair lifted from the woman's face. "Four other women and I founded A Woman's Place ten years ago this coming June. We're a community-based organization set up to serve the unique needs of women. We provide a space where women can gather and speak freely without the fear of men overhearing and, perhaps, becoming offended by what they say.

“In addition, we organize community events and provide emergency daycare...” Her voice caught and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, resolve filled their dark depths. “I’m sorry. It’s just...they didn’t even spare the children’s cots and blankets, or their toys.” Lips pressed tight, she reined in her emotions. “We provide emergency daycare for working mothers whose babysitters don’t show up as well as run a regular daycare program. The children are provided breakfast and lunch.

“Every evening we serve a meal for any woman or child who is here. Most importantly, though, we maintain an adult male-free space for women to come and to relax any time up to ten o’clock at night. We serve a snack to those who are here between nine and the time we close.”

“You said four of you founded this place. Where are the other three women? Do all of you work here?”

“Yes, we all work here. The others weren’t scheduled to arrive until seven-thirty. It was my day to open our doors. I phoned them and apprised them of the situation. They’re phoning our regular daycare clients.”

“We’ll need their names, phone numbers, and addresses. Do you know the woman you found this morning?”

“Not personally. I’ve seen her around the neighborhood. Sometimes, she sleeps beside our dumpster.” Abidi tipped her head toward the metal trash container.

“A harmless old woman, so we tried to make her feel welcomed. When one of us would find her asleep in the mornings, we’d invite her in for coffee and breakfast. She came to dinner sometimes as well, but I have never seen her speak more than a thank-you to anyone, except the children.”

Brows lifted, Nita asked, “What did she say to the children?”

A tender smile touched Abidi’s lips. “They called her Grandmother and would beg her to tell them stories. Sometimes the stories were obviously fairytales with witches and gnomes and fantastic places; other times, she spoke about other lands and other peoples. No matter what she talked about, she enchanted the children. Even the youngest would cease squirming when she began to speak.”

“My father was like that—a born storyteller,” Nita said.

“Few are gifted with that talent in today’s world.”

“Do you know anything else about her?”

“Now and then, she would fall asleep in one of the recliners and someone would lay a blanket over her. I don’t know how she does

it, but she always appears clean; even her sleeping bag is cleaner than one would expect under the circumstances. She carries a large duffel bag and keeps her sleeping bag tied to it. I haven't seen either, but then...." She waved a discouraged hand at the chaos. "That's all I know. Will she live?"

Nita pursed her lips then sighed. "I don't know. Officers found a duffel bag and sleeping bag in the dumpster. Did she ever give you her name?"

Abidi shook her head. "We called her Grandmother since that's what the children called her."

Brows bunched, she cocked her head. "Do you think she's an illegal immigrant?"

Anger pinched Abidi's face. "Illegal immigrant? You mean did she sneak into the United States to elude a blood-thirsty government, or a war-torn nation, or perhaps to escape starvation? I don't know how she came to be here, Sergeant."

"Do you think she was targeted or was this simply a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

A slight shrug of thin shoulders answered her

Deciding on a different tact, Nita asked, "Why do you think A Woman's Place was vandalized?"

The young woman's gaze flashed as she swung her arm to include, not only the devastation of the kitchen, but of the other rooms as well. "Have you read the graffiti on the walls, Sergeant? *Sand nigger go home. Death to Muslim terrorists.* That would seem to provide a fairly good clue." Bitterness filled Abidi's voice.

Nita moderated her voice to a deliberately mild tone. "This is a Muslim organization?"

A weary shake of the woman's head rejected that assumption. "I wear the hijab, a garment of modesty, though I am not Muslim, Sergeant. The garment is often associated with Muslim women, but women of many religions wear head coverings that look similar to the hijab—Pakistani and Ethiopian Christians. Hindu women as well as many sects of Christian nuns wear a complete covering over their hair. The Yemenite Jewish women cover not only their hair, but their entire faces, except for the eyes. Because some of the women who come here wear hijabs does not mean this is a Muslim organization."

"Other than the presence of women wearing hijabs, is there any other reason someone might target A Woman's Place?"

A wan smile touched Abidi's mouth. "Perhaps, it is because we welcome Muslim

women; or perhaps, it is because I am Arabic. Who knows why people choose to hate?"

"What about angry husbands or boyfriends? A woman who felt that she didn't receive equitable treatment here?"

A puzzled frown settled on Abidi's face. "A woman? I don't believe a woman would do this, Sergeant."

She raised her brows. "Why not?"

Abidi waved a hand toward the front of the building. "An old woman was beaten nearly to death. Garbage was strewn all over the place and the children's toys were damaged beyond repair. The place where we cook to feed people is in chaos. I cannot believe a woman would do such a cold and vengeful thing."

Nita closed the small notebook and slipped it into her pocket. "I'm sorry to say, but women are every bit as capable of reeking destruction as men. And every bit as capable of acting on hatred. As a detective, I need to explore any and all possibilities. If you would, I'd appreciate the names and the contact information for the other founders."

May 16

Monday 5 p.m.

The overly warm day--when it should've been cool spring weather in Seattle--hadn't helped Sergeant Nita Slowater's temper. She

wondered if this weather signaled permanent climate change. With a shake of her head, she admitted to herself that it probably did; and there was nothing she could do about it other than to remain aware of her own carbon footprint. The election hadn't helped her irritation level, either, with the one candidate's cavalier attitude about climate change and women's rights. She hated politics

Consciously forcing her mind back to the crime, she stomped up to the corkboard wall in the Command Center and stared at the crime scene investigator's photos of A Woman's Place. Her attention traveled to the photos taken at Harborview Hospital of the homeless woman found among the trash. Climate change might be out of her control, but she'd be damned if the person who assaulted that poor, old woman would remain free.

Jaw clenched at the brutality, she made her way to her seat at one end of the long, laminate-topped conference table. It wasn't often that she arrived in the Command Center before the rest of the team. She took the time to rein in her anger and begin thinking logically.

Laptop open, she logged into the online Team Room. Ronald Arneau, their hacker-turned-guru, already had everyone's notes

loaded. Skimming through them, she wanted to slam something. A helpless, old woman lay in the critical care unit and, so far, no one had the slightest clue who hurt her. The elevator down the hall dinged. She rubbed her hands down her face and put her cop mask in place; not that it did much good around here.

Mike entered first and distributed four pizzas along the length of the table. As he went to the counter along the side wall to pour a cup of coffee from the freshly brewed pot, the rest of the team wandered in. The absence of the usual razzing reflected the despondent mood.

The lieutenant set his cup on the table and passed out paper plates and napkins. Usually the first one to dive for the pizza boxes, Officer Driscoll Mulder slouched in his chair and popped a red coffee-stirrer into his mouth

The absence of Dr. Irene Nelson, FBI behavior analyst—popularly called a profiler—felt like a hole had swallowed part of the team. Irene had joined the Special Crimes Team not long after a rogue FBI agent had gotten Nita's best friend killed during an undercover operation. It wasn't until Irene proved herself during the Avenger case that Nita was able to accept her. Right now, they certainly could use her input.

The only civilian member of SCaT, Ronald Arneau, hustled in and slid into his seat close to Mike. “Sorry I’m late. Irene emailed me a site to check out; said the admin, Guy Runion, pulled serious time for fire-bombing a black church, but he’s been back in the Seattle area for the last twenty-three months,” he mumbled toward his computer screen. “That’s all she knew since he’s only on a hate-crimes watch-list; not a priority for the Feebs right now.”

“Nita, did you learn anything from Ms. Abidi or the other founders?” Mike flopped two pieces of Hawaiian pizza on a paper plate and sat in his chair at the opposite end of the table.

“Like Abidi, the other founders believe the center was targeted because of a misconception that it’s Muslim owned and run. The others are still in shock that anyone would do such a thing; however, Abidi didn’t have any trouble accepting that someone attacked the center.”

“That center isn’t Muslim?” A string of cheese hung off a piece of pizza on its way to Mulder’s mouth. “I’ve seen all kinds of women in those head wraps going in there.”

“Those head wraps are called hijabs. The center is open to all women, regardless of

religion, nationality, or whatever.” She reached for her slice of Hawaiian pizza

Detective Maizie O’Hara’s brow wrinkled. “You said she wasn’t surprised by the attack, but the other women were. Why?”

“The other three women are white and live in upper middle class neighborhoods. Though Abidi’s house is in a decent enough upper, working class neighborhood, it’s just a few blocks from a white area that doesn’t know whether it’s on the skids or scratching its way up. Consequently, some of the rougher elements drift over the line sometimes. She’s been called a raghead and a terrorist; told to go home a few times. Both at home and at A Woman’s Place, she’s received some nuisance calls recently. Hang-ups and heavy breathers; nothing said though. Since the election, she’s experienced more drive-by harassment by white males—teens and adults—and one incident where young, white males knocked her groceries out of her hands and shoved her. They ran off when a couple of women ran over to help her.” Nita’s fingers tattooed a restless rhythm next to her cup.

“Has she reported these incidents?” The younger detective frowned.

With a shrug, Nita said, “Didn’t see any reason to report them, since she couldn’t identify anyone. They just looked like a bunch

of scruffy white males to her. She did say she didn't believe they belonged in the area. Even though they wore torn jeans, they were the kind of jeans a person bought pre-torn."

The briefing ended quickly. When everyone else had left, Mike refilled Nita and his cups and dropped into a chair close to her. He gave his second-in-command a tired look. "What do you make of this?"

"Not sure." She pushed her laptop toward the center of the table and placed her cup squarely in front of herself. "It appears to be a hate crime, which fits in the parameters of what we investigate and that's the reason Captain Renners called us."

"You don't sound convinced." Mike slowly spun his cup between callused fingers

"Not enough information to say for sure. A bit of graffiti isn't conclusive." She ran a finger around the rim of her cup. "It all depends on motivation. Was the center attacked because it was perceived to be a Muslim organization, like Abidi believes; or was it attacked because someone had a bone to pick with one or more of the center's founders or with the old woman?"

Gulping the rest of his coffee, he propped a hand on the table and pushed to his feet. "We aren't likely to solve that mystery tonight. Let's go home and get some rest."

May 16

Monday 8:00 p.m.

As she stepped into the house, the sounds of pots and pans rattling in the kitchen accompanied Dawn singing along with a song Nita didn't recognize. Wearily, she plodded in, hung her holster on the hook by the kitchen table, and slumped in her chair.

Dawn turned sky blue eyes her way. "Rough day, huh?" Coffee in hand, she slid a cup in front of Nita, and then took a chair across the table.

Eyes closed, she sighed in pleasure from the first long swallow of Kona coffee shipped from Hawaii—one of their few extravagances. "How did you know I needed this?"

"Duh, you flew out of here early this morning and I haven't heard a word from you since. Not even to tell me that you wouldn't make dinner tonight with Jaz and Soda."

"Oh, crap!" She jolted upright in her seat. "I forgot all about that. Man, that kid's going to kill me."

Dawn reached over and patted her hand. "Jaz won't let her. Actually, Soda phoned around the time you should've been home and asked if I'd heard about the attack on a Muslim women's center in Seattle. One of her street friends called her. She wanted to know

if your team would be working it, and if that meant we wouldn't make it to dinner."

"What'd you tell her?" She relaxed back in her chair.

"I told her I hadn't heard from you, so you were probably tied up with that crime, or another one. She understood; said we can reschedule."

"I really wanted to see the stuff she's been doing with Phoenix."

"That little pit bull pup is growing like a weed, all long legs and too-big feet." Dawn chuckled as she rose from the table. "I'm going to heat up the stew from last night and warm a loaf of French bread. After dinner the only thing you're going to see is the shower and the bed. You look ready to drop."