Six Seconds

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Extract

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Prologue

The woman in the video is wearing a white shoulder-length hijab, embroidered with delicate beadwork. Her immaculate silk scarf frames her face, accentuating her natural beauty. She gives a tiny nod to the camera.

A soft cue is heard, then she begins.

"I am Samara. I am not a jihadist. I am a widow-mother baptized with the blood of my husband and my child when your governments murdered them."

Her strong, intelligent voice underscores her resolve in accented English, suggesting a mix of the Middle East and East London. Her eyes burn into the camera as it pulls back slowly. She speaks directly to the audience who will soon meet her on every television set in the world.

She lets a moment pass in silence. Her hands are clasped before her on a plain wooden table. Her rings glint from her thumb and wedding finger. The camera eases back, revealing a framed family photograph of a man, a boy and the woman herself. They are smiling. Joy swims in the woman's eyes. For it is a portrait of her from another time. Another life. It stands next to her as headstone to her happiness and witness to her destiny.

To exchange pain.

For the intelligence analysts who will study her message, there is no prepared statement. No grenade launcher on display before her. No AK-47 flanking her.

No chanting from the glorious text.

There are no black-and-gold flags on the walls behind her. No flags of any group. No carpet or fabric. The background is simple with angled mirrors.

Nothing betrays the woman's location, where she is recording her video or who is helping her. She could be in a safe house in the West Bank. Or in Athens. Maybe in Manila, Paris or London. Perhaps Madrid, or Casablanca.

Or in a suburb of the United States.

"Your soldiers invaded my home, tortured my husband and child. They forced them to watch as one by one they defiled me. Then they killed my husband and my son before my eyes. They fled when your bombers delivered death to my city. I carried my dead child through the ruins and to the bank of the river of Eden where I buried him, my husband and my life. But I have been resurrected to seek justice for these crimes.

"And it is for these crimes that I deliver my widow-mother's wrath. For these crimes you will taste death.

"Dying for me does not mean death. Dying for me is a promise kept. For I will have avenged the destruction of my world by bringing death to yours. Death is my reward as I join my husband and my child in paradise. For them, I am the eternal martyr. For them, I am vengeance."

Book One:
“Where is My Son?”

1

Blue Rose Creek, California

Maggie Conlin left her house believing a lie.

She believed life was normal again. She believed that the trouble preying on her family had passed, that Logan, her nine-year-old son, had come to terms with the toll Iraq had taken on them.

But the truth niggled at Maggie as she drove to work.

Their scars—the invisible ones—had not healed.

This morning, when she'd stood with Logan waiting for the school bus, he was uneasy.

"You love Dad, right, Mom?"

"Absolutely. With all my heart."

Logan looked at the ground and kicked a pebble.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I worry that something bad is going to happen. Like you might get a divorce."

Maggie clasped his shoulders. "No one's getting divorced. It's okay to be confused. It hasn't been easy these past few months since Daddy got home. But the worst is over now, right?"

Logan nodded.

"Daddy and I will always be right here, together in this house. Always. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Remember, I'm picking you up after school today for your swim class. So don't get on the bus."

"Okay. Love you, Mom."

Logan hugged her so hard it hurt. Then he ran to his bus, waved and smiled from the window before he vanished.

Maggie reflected on his worries as she drove through Blue Rose Creek, a city of a hundred thousand near Riverside County, on her way to the Liberty Valley Promenade Mall. She parked her Ford Focus and clocked in at Stobel and Chadwick, where she was a senior associate bookseller.

Her morning went fast as she called customers telling them orders had arrived, helped others find titles, suggested gift books and restocked bestsellers. As busy as she was, Maggie could not escape the truth. Her family had been fractured by events no one could control.

Her husband, Jake, was a trucker. In recent years, his rig had kept breaking down, and the bills piled up. It was bad. To help, he took a contract job driving in Iraq. High-paying, but dangerous. Maggie didn't want him to go. But they needed the money.

When he came home a few months ago, he was a changed man. He fell into long, dark moods, grew mistrustful, paranoid and had unexplained outbursts. Something had happened to him in Iraq but he refused to talk about it, refused to get help.

Was it all behind them?

Their debts were cleared, they'd put money in the

bank. Jake had good long-haul driving jobs and seemed to have settled down, leaving Maggie to believe that maybe, just maybe, the worst was over.

"Call for you, Maggie," came the voice over the P.A. system. She took it at the kiosk near the art history books.

"Maggie Conlin. May I help you?"

"It's me."

"Jake? Where are you?"

"Baltimore. Are you working all day today?"

"Yes. When do you expect to get home?"

"I'll be back in California by the weekend. How's Logan?"

"He misses you."

"I miss him, too. Big-time. I'll take care of things when I get home."

"I miss you, too, Jake."

"Listen, I've got to go."

"I love you."

He didn't respond, and in the long-distance silence, Maggie knew that Jake still clung to the untruth that she'd cheated on him while he was in Iraq. Standing there at the kiosk of a suburban bookstore, she ached for the man she fell in love with to return to her. Ached to have their lives back. "I love you and I miss you, Jake."

"I've got to go."

Twice that afternoon, Maggie stole away to the store's restroom, where she sat in a stall, pressing tissue to her eyes.

After work, Maggie made good time with the traffic on her way to Logan's school. The last buses were lumbering off when she arrived.

Maggie signed in at the main office then went to the classroom designated for pickups. Eloise Pearce, the teacher in charge, had two boys and two girls waiting with her. Logan was not among them. Maybe he was in the washroom?

"Mrs. Conlin?" Eloise smiled. "Goodness, why are you here? Logan's gone."

"He's gone? What do you mean, he's gone?"

"He got picked up earlier today."

"No, that's wrong!"

Eloise said Logan's sign-out was done that morning at the main office. Maggie hurried back there and smacked the counter bell loud enough for a secretary and Terry Martens, the vice-principal, to emerge.

"Where is my son? Where is Logan Conlin?"

"Mrs. Conlin." The vice-principal slid the day's sign-out book to Maggie. "Mr. Conlin picked up Logan this morning."

"But Jake's in Baltimore. I spoke to him on the phone a few hours ago."

Terry Martens and the secretary traded glances.

"He was here this morning, Mrs. Conlin," the vice-principal said. "He said something unexpected had come up and you couldn't make it to the school."

"What?"

"Is everything all right?"

Maggie's breathing quickened as she called Jake's cell phone while hurrying to her car. She got several static-filled rings before his voice mail kicked in.

"Jake, please call me and tell me what's going on! Please!"

Each red light took forever as Maggie drove through

traffic. She called her home number, got her machine and left another message for Jake. Wheeling into her neighborhood, Maggie considered calling 911.

And what would I say?

Better to get home. Figure this out. Maybe she'd misunderstood and the guys were at home right now. Was Jake actually in Blue Rose Creek? Why would he tell her he was in Baltimore? Why would he lie?

Turning onto her street, Maggie expected to see Jake's rig parked in its place next to their bungalow.

It wasn't there.

The brakes on her Ford screeched as she roared into her driveway, trotted to the door, jammed her key in the lock.

"Logan!"

No sign of Logan's pack at the door. Maggie went to his room. No sign of Logan or his pack there. She hurried from room to room, searching in vain.

"Jake! Logan!"

She called Jake's cell again.

And she kept calling.

Then she called Logan's teacher, then Logan's friends. No one knew, or had heard anything. She ran next door to Mr. Miller's house, but the retired plumber said he hadn't been home all day. She called Logan's swim coach. She called the yard where Jake got his rig serviced.

No one had heard anything.

Was she crazy? You can't drive from Baltimore to California in half a day. Jake said he was in Baltimore.

She rifled through Jake's desk not knowing what she was looking for. She called the cell-phone company to

see if billing could confirm where Jake was when he made the call. It took some choice words before they checked, only to tell her that there was no record of calls being placed on Jake's cell phone for the past two days.

By early evening she phoned police.

The dispatcher tried to calm Maggie. "Ma'am, we'll put out a description of the truck and plate. We'll check for any traffic accidents. That's all we can do for now."

As night fell, Maggie lost track of time and the calls she'd made. Clutching her cordless phone, she jumped to her window each time a vehicle passed her house as Logan's words haunted the darkness that swallowed her.

"…something bad is going to happen…"