

# Spying on Gran



Jennifer L. Armstrong

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By  
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## Chapter One

No one has the right to complain about his life. That was the opinion of Boneh P. Cheeseman. No one has the right to complain because they didn't have his life.

For one thing, they didn't have his name. It was a matter of routine at school to be called Cheddarman, Swissman, and by the more sophisticated, Brieman. The Boneh didn't help either. It was a fine name for his grandfather who it had originated with, but not for a fifteen-year-old living in the twenty-first century. It was Hebrew for beaver. His great-grandfather had been some kind of an English theologian who studied the Old Testament in Hebrew. When he had come to Canada, he had named his son for the great Canadian symbol.

Using the P. wouldn't help. In a complete lapse of sanity, his mother had given him the middle name of Percival.

And speaking of his mom, she had gone and done the worst possible thing a mother could do. When he was five, she had died, leaving him to live with his Gran and her unmarried brother. His great-uncle also lived with the burden of an uncool name, Cawley. It meant cow meadow.

His dad, the one who had burdened him with the name of Cheeseman, was a General in the Canadian Army, currently serving in a multinational task force in Iraq. That was cool, but it didn't really help in everyday matters. Matters such as Gran's cats, for example.

Gran had adopted a stray cat that had ended up having four kittens under her bed. Before that, the same cat had had two batches of kittens in Gran's woodpile in the backyard. Gran had been feeding them ever since and the females in the bunch had gone on to have more kittens. Gran knew all their names and their genealogies. It was all way too complicated for Boneh to figure out. (Though he had to admit, the kittens were cute and even some of the cats were pretty interesting.)

But his main concern was that every morning, there was Gran, out in her purple silk bathrobe, feeding them and calling out, "Good morning, Maple! Oh there you are, Olive! Sugar, you lovely thing . . ."

Uncle Cawley had to buy dry cat food in 20 kilogram bags.

It was bad enough that one day, someone who knew Boneh might see Gran out in her bathrobe feeding the outdoor cats, but Boneh couldn't even invite people over to his house for the indoor cats. They were everywhere and they always had the best seats in the house.

There was the mother, Ginger, who liked to perch on the back of Uncle Cawley's chair and sleep all day. She didn't seem to mind in the least that Gran had deprived her of her freedom and gotten her spayed. Then there were the kittens – Honey (the only male), Pudding, Cinnamon and Cookie. Gran had a thing for food names. All of them had been neutered and spayed, mercifully meaning that there would be no further cat reproduction in the house.

The kittens weren't exactly kittens anymore, but they were always referred to as such to distinguish them from their mother.

The kittens this and the kittens that . . .

Much of Gran and Uncle Cawley's conversations centered on the kittens.

"Oh look at Pudding!"

"Oh look at Cinnamon!"

"Oh look! Cookie's found a new place to hide!"

"Aren't they all darling playing in that box?"

“Honey! Stop that! You’ve been neutered!”

The worst part was, he found himself joining in on the talk.

And then there was the matter of Gran taking the cats out for a walk. Her indoor cats all had collars and leashes and every day, Gran would take a different one out for a walk on a leash. A cat is not a dog and Gran was the only one in their neighborhood who did such a thing.

Uncle Cawley – a former journalist - spent his days reading four Toronto newspapers and cutting out articles for an enormous scrapbook. Boneh couldn’t figure out whether there was a theme to what he clipped out or whether he just went by what interested him.

He had often peeked over his shoulder as he passed by.

*Mid-East oil supply uncertain – Alberta to benefit*

*Foreign missionaries detained in government purge*

*The changing face of Arab youth*

Boneh had tried to interest his grand-uncle in going online.

“They even have newspapers online, Uncle Cawley. Saves a lot of paper, you know.”

But Uncle Cawley had no interest in online newspapers. So the four Toronto dailies kept coming to their house. For some reason, Uncle Cawley had no interest in the local community newspaper that was focused on just their suburb.

His grand-uncle and Gran had treated him almost as an equal, expecting him to share in the chores at a young age, so it had become Boneh’s job to prepare the evening meal.

He was really good at boxed macaroni-and-cheese with green peas. Scrambled eggs were pretty easy. Sometimes he did toasted cheese supper. He had recently learned how to make instant rice, which had opened up his repertoire a bit. There was always brown beans and wieners when he couldn’t think of anything else.

He thought it was ironic that he lived with his Gran and yet she didn’t do any of the things you would consider the perks of living with a grandmother - like bake cookies, for example.

Gran was actually pretty good on the computer and she didn’t need any help from him. She had her own computer up in her bedroom and sometimes he would hear her clicking away on the keyboard, even late at night.

He knew better than to complain about his situation. Once, he had let it drop to a teacher that he wasn't happy with his life at home. She had immediately passed it on to the principal. Boneh had found himself facing a huge cherry wood desk with the big guy himself on the other side, asking him all sorts of questions.

Did his Gran drink?

No.

Did his Gran gamble?

No.

Did his grand-uncle abuse him in any way?

No.

Did they make him work?

He decided at this point not to mention making dinner and again answered, No.

Did they provide for his basic needs?

Yes.

The grilling had taught him that it was best just to keep quiet.

He told himself it was only a matter of waiting a bit. In a few years, he would be on his own. Maybe he could join the army, go to Iraq, see his dad. Whatever. Just to get away from the cats.

He never said, even in his mind, *to get away from Gran*. Gran had been raising him since he was five. But there was just something inside of him that said, *there's got to be more*.

## Chapter Two

**T**hey were talking in low voices.

That was unusual enough that Boneh paused on the stairs. Normally Gran and Uncle Cawley's conversations were loud enough to waft right up the stairs.

Their voices became normal when they realized he was coming downstairs. It was Saturday and they were in the kitchen. Uncle Cawley had made French toast for breakfast. Then he had a big day ahead of him with the weekend newspapers.

After breakfast, Boneh expected Gran to take a cat out for a walk.

But instead, as soon as her coffee and plate of food was finished, she returned to her bedroom. Passing by her room, Boneh could see her at the computer, tapping away.

"Uh, isn't it Cookie's turn for a walk?" he asked.

"Not today, dear," said Gran absently, not pausing in her typing.

He hurried along to his room before she could decide that he would be a good candidate for a cat walk.

Even Uncle Cawley was acting strange. When Boneh came back downstairs, his uncle wasn't cutting and pasting. He was

reading. Sidling by him, Boneh could see it was an article about some government doings in Iraq. Probably reading it because Boneh's father was there.

"Do you have any homework?" asked Uncle Cawley abruptly. This was the first time he had ever asked the question.

"Uh, yeah. An essay. And some geometry."

"Homework is good," said Uncle Cawley, temporarily closing his newspaper. "It's good to do homework."

Boneh took the hint.

He returned upstairs and did his homework.

It crossed his mind that maybe Gran and Uncle Cawley were really secret agents.

It was a hopeful thought, but it didn't make the essay and the geometry any more interesting.

Gran and Uncle Cawley continued to act strange. At lunch, Gran made grilled cheese sandwiches, nothing unusual in that. But what was really weird was when she handed him his plate, she absent-mindedly said, "Tfuddal."

*Tfuddal?*

Was his Gran losing her mind? He decided he'd have to Google "Alzheimer's" after lunch.

She wasn't the only one saying strange things. Uncle Cawley muttered something about a passport costing \$87. To the best of his knowledge, Uncle Cawley had no plans to travel. Once Gran had said that they should go visit the Elora Gorge, so Boneh could see some Ontario scenery. But Uncle Cawley had shown no interest in leaving his comfortable chair in the living room.

"Are you going somewhere, Uncle Cawley?" he asked, biting into his sandwich.

"It's always good to be prepared," said Uncle Cawley, piling ketchup on his plate.

Maybe it wasn't so weird. Lots of old people traveled. Cruises and stuff. But what would happen to him if Gran and Uncle Cawley started traveling the world?

"Are you going to travel, Gran?" he asked.

"Mumkin," she said, joining them at the kitchen table with her sandwich.

*Mumkin?*

What would he do if Gran got Alzheimer's and Uncle Cawley went off on a cruise?

Gran was a little more back-to-normal after lunch. She picked up Honey who was lounging on the best chair in the house and said, "Is it Granny-Honey cuddle time? Whose Granny's big boy?" *Kiss, kiss.* "Is it Honey?" *Kiss, kiss.* And the big guy just took it, Gran tickling his tummy and talking baby talk.

But Boneh was relieved.

If Gran had Alzheimer's, that would probably mean a nursing home for her. She was Mom's mother, so Boneh couldn't expect his father to pay for that. He'd have to go to work right after high school to pay for the fees . . .

Uncle Cawley still had newspapers to go through. After putting Honey down, Gran went down in the basement muttering something about doing some cleaning.

For some reason, the basement was off-limits to Boneh. It was just the way it was. It had always been that way. As a five-year-old, he had accepted it as the way things were. As he had grown up, he had been far too interested in his own life to care what Gran and Uncle Cawley did with their basement. For one thing, Gran and Uncle Cawley rarely went down there themselves. For another thing, it seemed poorly lit and kind of scary.

But today, Boneh was curious.

"Need some help, Gran?" he called down the staircase.

"No, dear. You stay up there," was her reply.

"You stay up here," repeated Uncle Cawley. He didn't say it in a harsh way, just a matter-of-fact way. Uncle Cawley was a good sort. In all his years, he had never raised his voice with Boneh.

"Need some help, Uncle Cawley?" said Boneh, now suddenly wanting to get a better idea of what it was his Gran and Uncle did all day.

"Nope," said Uncle Cawley, his eyes on the *Globe & Mail*.

"You sure I can't do anything?"

"No thanks, Boneh."

Boneh started for the stairs.

"Wait," said Uncle Cawley. Boneh stopped. "There is one thing."

"Uh-huh?"

"Can you put on a pot of coffee?"

It got even weirder the next day at church.

When Boneh came out of his teen Bible study, Gran and Uncle Cawley weren't in their usual pew.

Normally, Boneh found it mildly embarrassing to have to sit with Gran and Uncle Cawley. Gran didn't seem to put much effort into her appearance, looking pretty much the same at church as she did at home. Uncle Cawley made an attempt to dress up a bit – by wearing a sport jacket that looked like it came from a thrift store.

But today, he was looking all around for them. The choir at the front had started singing. Boneh sat down. Maybe they were still in the fellowship hall. They certainly weren't in the sanctuary. He focused on the choir. He had always wished that Gran would be more like some of those old ladies in the choir – more *grandmotherly*.

Maybe something had happened.

Maybe Uncle Cawley had gotten dizzy and fallen. Maybe Gran had muttered more words like “tfuddal” and “mumkin” and someone had insisted that she be taken to the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Concerned, Boneh, stood up as the pastor was welcoming the congregation to the morning worship service.

Out in the fellowship hall, he surveyed the room, now nearly empty. No Gran. No Uncle Cawley.

The Ladies room was off-limits to him but he did a quick check of the “Gents” as Uncle Cawley always called it. No one.

The Sunday school rooms were also empty. There was only one more hallway to check. It wasn't one he normally went down. It led to the large room where the adults had their Bible study. At the end of it was the boardroom.

There was only one other door. Normally, it was closed. Today, it was open just a smidge. “Just a smidge” was something Gran sometimes said.

“Open it just a smidge,” she would say to Boneh about the oven door. “See if the pizza is burning.”

And today, he heard Gran's voice coming from that smidge of an opening.

The room was filled with cardboard boxes. Gran and Uncle Cawley were talking to a man that Boneh had never paid attention to before. He thought he was a deacon, the type of unassuming man who always seems to have a job to do around the church.

They were speaking in voices too low for Boneh to make out what they were saying. It seemed a strange room to have a meeting in. There were no chairs or tables.

And to the best of his knowledge, Gran and Uncle Cawley had no responsibilities at the church.

So why would they be having an intense meeting in what looked like a storage room?

But at least he knew where they were and that nothing catastrophic had happened. He decided to return to the pew before they caught him spying on them. When they did join him, just as the community announcements were being read, all they did was smile at him. No explanation.

When they got home from church, Gran made them all tuna sandwiches. Then she was back on the computer.

Boneh spent the afternoon on his computer too, watching music videos on YouTube. Then, since dinner was his responsibility, he went downstairs and made one of his more elaborate meals – corned beef hash.

“I really liked the sermon today,” he said, as they ate around the kitchen table.

“Mmm-hmm,” said Uncle Cawley, adding some ketchup to his plate.

“Living honestly,” continued Boneh.

“Folks oughta do it,” agreed Uncle Cawley.

“Jesus lived honestly,” said Boneh. He was now aware that he was the one acting strange. He never discussed the sermon.

“Jesus is the answer to every problem,” said Gran, thus bringing the theological discussion to an end because Boneh couldn’t think of a reply.

“How’d that homework go?” Uncle Cawley asked when they were all taking their plates to the dishwasher.

“Fine,” said Boneh.

And that was their conversation for the evening.



## Chapter Three

**I**t was a disturbing thought that after ten straight years in the public school system, Boneh had no idea what he wanted to do with his life.

He was pondering this during a meeting with the guidance counselor. He had been the only student in his class not to participate in the “Go To Work with Your Parent Day” and for some reason, his teacher had thought this merited a visit to the counselor. It wasn’t as if he had skipped school that day. He had spent it in the school library reading graphic novels.

“My Gran doesn’t do anything,” he protested to the slim young man who had obviously found what he wanted to do.

“Everybody does something,” said the man.

“My Gran doesn’t,” he said.

“What does she do?” the man asked.

“Well . . .” Boneh gave this some thought. “I think she puts away dishes. When they’re clean, I mean. And she probably makes Uncle Cawley his coffee . . .”

“What does your Uncle Cawley do?”

“He cuts out newspapers.”

The eyebrows of the counselor went up.

"If you don't mind me asking, how do they, er, generate an income?"

"Well, they're *old*," said Boneh. "Don't they, like, get cheques from the government?"

The counselor nodded.

"And my dad sends them money to cover my expenses."

"Well, what did your grandmother do before she retired?" asked the counselor, trying to go at it a different way.

Boneh thought about this.

She had been retired when he moved in, ten years ago. But he had gotten the sense that she had taken an early retirement to care for him.

"I dunno," he said. "I think she worked for an oil company. Not on an oil rig, or anything interesting," he added quickly. "She seems to know a lot about oil."

"Was she an administrative assistant, perhaps?" asked the counselor.

"Maybe, yeah."

"And did your uncle also work in the oil industry?"

Boneh shook his head.

"He was a journalist."

"Oh. Well that would explain the newspapers." The counselor's eyes went down to the file on his desk, Boneh's file.

"So . . . the topic we're discussing is your future career," he said, in case Boneh had forgotten. "And you have no idea what you would like to do when you graduate?"

Boneh shook his head.

"I dunno, maybe I'll join the army."

"Well, that's not a bad idea," said the counselor. He sounded relieved that it wasn't an entirely blank future. "Is there anything, in particular, that you know a lot about?"

"I know a lot about cats," he said truthfully.

The counselor didn't know what to say about this.

"Kitten breeder, perhaps," he murmured after a moment.

"I can cook," Boneh added.

"Oh that's good!" The counselor's face brightened. "That's a very useful skill!"

The counselor was deciding that he wasn't such a lost cause after all.

“Well, thanks for stopping by, er, Boneh.” He had to consult the file to get his name right. “Keep up the good work!”

“Yeah, sure,” said Boneh, standing up. Back to Geometry. He was sort of hoping to miss it.

But the meeting with the counselor had gotten him thinking.

What had Gran and Uncle Cawley been like before him? He gathered that they had shared a house ever since Gran became a widow. But had life been more exciting before he came along? He knew one thing, their conversion to Christianity had been fairly late in life. It happened when he was about six. And it was something that his father hadn’t been pleased about. He had left Boneh in their care and suddenly, they were taking him to church.

That night, over a dinner of canned ravioli and cooked frozen carrots, Boneh asked his uncle, “What newspaper did you work for, Uncle Cawley?”

“One of the big ones,” said his uncle, adding some salt to the carrots on his plates. “Why do you ask?”

“My guidance counselor wants me to know what I’m going to do with my life,” he explained.

“Oh,” said Uncle Cawley. He gave it some thought. “Well, a journalist is just one of many things, you know.”

Boneh nodded.

His grades in English had already determined that any career involving writing was not in his future.

“What about you, Gran?” he said. “You worked in the oil industry, right?”

She nodded.

Today, she was looking particularly stylish in blue jeans and a black turtleneck. One thing he had never seen Gran in was the typical floral dress favoured by grandmothers in the movies. Gran was always in pants.

“Which company?”

“One of the big ones,” she said.

Why did he suddenly feel like things were being kept from him? Maybe things had always been kept from him and it was something he was only noticing now.

“The counselor thought I might make a good kitten breeder,” he said, just to liven things up.

"I think that would too heart-breaking," said Gran, leaning down to pick-up Cookie who happened to be passing by. "I would get attached to every kitten."

Boneh knew he wouldn't have that problem. At the same time, he doubted he could make a living bringing kittens into the world.

"I think Sugar got into a fight," said Gran turning to Uncle Cawley. Sugar was a magnificent white tom that spent his days lounging in the backyard on Gran's patio chairs. "He had a little scratch over his eye when I went out this morning."

"He can take care of himself," said Uncle Cawley. To his credit, Uncle Cawley didn't get too mushy over the cats. But he didn't mind petting them when they came brushing up against his leg.

"How did you become a Christian, Gran?" Boneh asked.

"I read a Bible," said his grandmother.

"How did you become a Christian, Uncle Cawley?" said Boneh, turning to his uncle.

"Your grandmother gave me her Bible to read," said Uncle Cawley.

"Why the questions, dear?" his grandmother asked, putting down Cookie to return her attention to her plate.

"It's the guidance counselor, Edna," said Uncle Cawley. "They ask all sorts of questions."

Boneh decided to let it go at that.

One thing that was never on in his house was the television. There was an old one sitting on a stand in the corner of the living room. Uncle Cawley said he only kept it in case there was another 9-11.

Boneh was almost too young to remember the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon. Plus, other stuff had been going on in his life at the time. His mom had died, for one thing.

It was kind of weird. While North America had been focused on the attacks against New York and Washington and thousands had lost loved ones, he and his dad were losing their own loved one to cancer in a Toronto hospital. He vaguely remembered his dad carrying him into the hospital to see "Mommy." Then one day, as his mom had been lying still in the bed, he had been

brought in for one last visit. To say goodbye. In retrospect, he was pretty sure his mom was already dead that last visit.

*Little tragedies and big ones.*

It was something Gran had said over the years, Gran who had lost a daughter. They were going through their own tragedy while the world watched an even bigger one on television.

Then his dad had been sent off, first to Afghanistan and then to Iraq, which at the time, hadn't been so bad. His dad had sunk into depression after his mom had died. All Boneh remembered of his dad in those days after his mother had died was a dark house, curtains closed and him being put in front of the television all the time. Gran and Uncle Cawley had given him a better home, one with open curtains and no television. There had been walks to the park and ice cream cones. That's what Boneh remembered most about his early days with Gran and Uncle Cawley.

Uncle Cawley had started walking him to kindergarten and always seemed to have some words of advice.

*Even a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.*

*Respect yourself and others will do the same.*

*Don't follow the path. Go where there's no path and leave a trail.*

And in a strange way, the words had helped. They gave him something to think about, to ponder, instead of thinking, why did God take away my mom?

Somehow, Gran and Uncle Cawley had never let him sink into self-pity. They expected him to carry his load and in exchange, he was treated as one of them.

The cats had come later. Boneh wished that a stray mother dog had had puppies in the woodpile instead.

Boneh joined Gran and Uncle Cawley in the living room where they were drinking instant hot chocolate and talking about their upcoming weeknight Bible study. Boneh was restless, but he didn't feel like watching anything on YouTube tonight. Mike, the friend he ate lunch with every day, was always watching something on Netflix, but all Boneh could hope for were pirated copies on YouTube if he was going to keep up with the latest movies.

He knew better than to start asking more questions. He decided to try a different approach. Both Gran and Uncle Cawley had bookshelves filled to overflowing in their rooms. There was a

bookcase out in the living room but they had left it to Boneh to fill over the years. It held all the picture books he had outgrown, the complete Hardy Boys series (which he hadn't quite outgrown), some Star Wars novels, a few sci-fi novels his dad had sent him over the years, a junior Encyclopedia set that he had found in a box at a garage sale for \$5 and still used a lot when he had to write a report.

"Gran, do you have any book I could read?" he asked. "Maybe about the oil industry?"

"Sure, Boneh," she said, putting her hot chocolate down on the side table beside her chair and standing up. She went upstairs. Boneh noticed she didn't invite him to come along. Gran and Uncle Cawley never let Boneh into their bedrooms. As a young boy, the doors had always been shut. Now they might be ajar, but they always talked to him at their doors rather than inviting him into their rooms.

It was something Boneh never really thought about, until now.

Gran came back with a general book about the oil industry.

Boneh thanked her and settled down on the couch to read it. He could see why she selected this one. It was well-illustrated.

Never one to read things in order, he got caught up in a chapter on oil spills and oil-well fires. He read about a guy who was so good at putting out oil-well fires that they had made a movie about him starring John Wayne, called *Hellfighters*. Maybe he'd look it up online and see if he could watch it somewhere. While he was reading, he became aware of Gran and Uncle Cawley's conversation. Their Wednesday night Bible study was going through some book about how to live your life with purpose.

"I don't go to a Bible study to read some guy's book. I can't even say it's some guy's book about the Bible because he rips every scripture out of context to make his point."

Boneh glanced up briefly to see Uncle Cawley shaking his head.

"It's unfortunate that they don't realize the value of the Bible itself," Gran replied. "I think they feel more comfortable in a book than they do in the Bible."

"Well, that's just it. They want a bit of change in their lives, but not too much change . . ."

It was a surprise to hear Gran and Uncle Cawley talk this way. He just assumed that adults all agreed on the topic of the Bible, but it sounded as if Gran and Uncle Cawley didn't like the way their Bible study group was going.

He continued to read about oil. Oil touched everyone's lives. Not only did oil fuel the world's transportation system, thousands of household items were made of oil.

The second half of the book was about the politics of oil. It was interesting to read about the oil sheikhs who had become billionaires. A hundred years ago, their grandparents had been sitting on empty sand. By ten o'clock – and his bedtime – he was reading about the whole process of actually getting the oil out of the ground. He liked what he saw. It looked like a real man's job, something his dad would be proud of. Maybe he would follow in Gran's steps and work in the oil industry.

"Can I keep this for a bit longer?" he asked Gran, as he stood up.

"Sure, sweetie," she said. She and Uncle Cawley were still having their discussion. They seemed to be of one mind on the idea that a Bible study should study the Bible, not another book.

Gran got a kiss on the cheek, Uncle Cawley a nod and a "good night" before Boneh went upstairs. Things felt good at the moment. He was learning a little more about the past and it looked like it might be pointing him in a direction for the future.



## Chapter Four

By coincidence, the next day, his whimsical English Composition teacher gave an assignment to his students to write about “The Future and Where I See Myself In It.”

The oil industry would be a good topic. No matter what anyone said about the future of oil, the book he had read last night assured him that there was still plenty of it in the Alberta tar sands. And working in Alberta wouldn’t even require him to leave the country.

But what really appealed to him was the thought of going somewhere else. He had liked the pictures of the men on the oilrigs and of the enormous oil refineries in the desert.

“Hey Mike,” he said at lunch, when they were sitting in the crowded cafeteria eating their bagged lunches. Mike’s mother made his lunches and always included an apple or a carrot that he threw away with the bag. Boneh made his own lunches that included a piece of fruit that he didn’t throw away. There was something about Gran and Uncle Cawley not forcing fruits and vegetables on him that made him want to eat a balanced diet. “You think Netflix has *Hellfighters*?”

“What’s that?” asked Mike, biting into a ham and Swiss on a bun. “Some vampire movie?”

Boneh shook his head as he took a bite out of his tuna on whole wheat. “No. Guys who put out oil fires. John Wayne. 1968, I think.”

“That’s pretty old,” said Mike.

“Yeah, but they have old movies, don’t they?”

“Yeah, I guess so. But only my mother watches them. Hey, check out the head gear,” said Mike, nodding toward a student Boneh had never seen before.

The girl was wearing a head-scarf and looked out-of-place in the cafeteria. She was holding a lunch bag and scanning the room for a place to sit. For a moment, Boneh wondered if he should go over and tell her she could sit with him and Mike. But then she went and sat by herself at one end of a long table.

“She’s probably one of the ones that was in on it when they blew up New York,” said Mike, reaching for a chip from a bag he had bought from a vending machine.

“Man, Mike! She was probably five-years-old when it happened!”

Mike shrugged.

“Her dad then.”

Boneh shook his head. He was pretty sure that every Muslim wasn’t into blowing up things, but he didn’t know enough about it to say much.

“Anyway, Dad’s thinking of getting rid of Netflix. He says we watch it too much. Amy sits around in her room all day doing her nails and watching romantic comedies. I, apparently, watch too many action movies and crime things. Mom’s worried I’m gonna grow up to be a criminal. She should talk. Last night she was so busy watching some movie with some blond chick that we had to eat canned beans for dinner. *Pillow Talk*. That was the name of the movie . . .”

Boneh was watching the Muslim student. She had a lunch in front of her. From what he could see, it was some kind of pita bread and some fruit. That couldn’t be easy. Not only did she have to wear the scarf on her head, she had to eat pita bread in a high school cafeteria.

Boneh liked pita bread. Once he used it in one of his dinners. Bought something in a tub called hummus that said on the

package, "Serve with pita bread." Gran and Uncle Cawley had really liked it. Maybe, if he had the chance, he'd talk to her about what else you could do with pita bread.

That night, he got a phone call from Mike.

"Hey man! What's the name of that movie you wanted? Hell-something."

"*Hellfighters*," he said.

"Oh," said the voice on the other end. "Netflix has *Hellraiser*, *Hellboy*, *In Hell* . . ."

Boneh let him list every movie that had the word "hell" in it, before Mike moved on to the topic of Geometry homework.

"I found a site online with all of the answers to our textbook. Do you want it, man?"

"Nah," said Boneh. "I should probably just learn it."

"You're such good boy," said Mike. "Anyway, if you change your mind, call me."

He hung up.

"What was that you said about *Hellfighters*?" Uncle Cawley asked. They were in the living room where his uncle was flipping through a Canadian Tire flyer.

"Just a movie I thought might be cool to watch."

"I liked that movie," said Uncle Cawley, getting up and going over to the bottom of a hutch where there were a few old VHS movies. "I think I may have it in here . . ."

After a few seconds, he held up the tape.

*What are the odds?* thought Boneh.

"Want to watch it?" his uncle asked.

"Sure," said Boneh, sitting down on the sofa while Uncle Cawley went over to the television set. He switched on the VCR and inserted the tape in the slot. They didn't even have a DVD player.

"What's this?" asked Gran, coming in during the opening credits that were running against a backdrop of a spectacular oil well fire.

"An old movie the lad wanted to see," Uncle Cawley explained. "John Wayne fights oil fires."

"Based on Red Adair," said Gran, nodding. "I remember that one. I'll make some popcorn."

Gran returned a few minutes later with three cans of ginger ale and a bowl of microwave popcorn.

The movie showed the lives of the various men who helped to put out the oil well fires. Boneh could do without all the relationship stuff, but he enjoyed the scenes where they had to clear away the debris of the oil well and then maneuver the bundle of nitroglycerin into place. The resulting explosion extinguished the fire and enabled the men to be able to move in and cap the well.

"They have chemicals they use to put out the fires now," murmured Uncle Cawley as he ate popcorn.

Boneh was thinking it was pretty cool. He could get into that. Maybe this aspect of the oil industry was the place for him.

"I remember meeting Red Adair," said Gran, as the final credits were rolling. "Although, I didn't really meet him. He just passed by my desk. He was quite the celebrity in the oil world."

"He must have been if John Wayne played him," said Boneh.

"Yes, that's always a measure of a man's success," said Uncle Cawley smiling. "Which big actor plays you in the story of your life. Personally, I think I'd like to see Robert Redford play me . . ."

Gran shook her head as she stood up with the empty popcorn bowl. But she was smiling.

It was too late to start his English composition, but Boneh had a pretty good idea of how to approach it – a future fighting oil well fires.

Gran and Uncle Cawley were out at their Bible-study.

Boneh was working on his oil well fires paper. But he was having trouble. The movie had been a good starting point, but it didn't give him the content he needed for an entire paper. He thought of the books in Gran's room.

He was at his desk in his room. The internet would provide him with all the info he needed. But Gran had so many books in her room. Maybe he would just go check out her bookshelf.

He knew he shouldn't, though.

Gran never let him just wander into her room.

And if he did borrow a book, he'd have to return it before she got home so that she wouldn't know he'd been in her room. He should just wait til she got home. But that could be ten o'clock if she and Uncle Cawley hung around the church. And his paper was due tomorrow.

Boneh stood up.

Internet. He knew he should just do his research on the internet.

Down the hallway he went to Gran's room. Her door was shut. But not locked. There were no locks in this house.

*That's because they trust me*, he thought. *They trust me not to go through their stuff.*

He almost turned back.

He wouldn't even take the book out of the room, he decided. Just take a quick peek at what was on her shelf, skim it if it looked good, then back to his room to do the rest of his research online.

He turned the knob.

Gran's room was dark.

It smelled like Gran, some kind of scent that made you think you were in an Eastern souk – like incense. In fact, he spotted a bottle of sandalwood oil on the top of Gran's dresser.

He didn't like being in here. It was invading Gran's privacy. There was nothing out-of-place or unusual about the room, he just knew he shouldn't be here.

And yet, he moved on to the bookshelf. He told himself it was for his paper. Nothing more than that. And yet he knew, it was more than that. There was something Gran and Uncle Cawley were keeping from him and he wanted to know what it was. He knew it was probably nothing. Adults always had secrets, or at the very least, things they didn't bother to tell the kids. But it didn't stop him from being curious.

Gran had other books on her shelf about oil, including a set of slim volumes about every country that was currently producing oil. In *Hellfighters*, they had had to cap five burning wells while under gunfire in Venezuela. He picked up the book about Venezuela, but it was just a survey of the country, not anything that he could use in his paper.

*Emergency Response Management of Oil-Related Disasters*. That was exactly what he needed! It was a bit technical, being a guidebook, but as he skimmed through it, he knew he needed this book.

But that would mean returning to his room with it. He glanced at Gran's bedside alarm clock. 7:33. The Bible-study had started at 7:30, although Gran and Uncle Cawley had left twenty minutes ago. As long as he had the book back in place by 9:00, Gran would never know he had borrowed it.

He practically ran back to his room with the book. Typing furiously, he deciphered as much of it as he could into everyday talk rather than technical talk. He felt like James Bond.

8:47.

He was doing pretty good. Only one more chapter to hurry through.

He finished the last chapter in ten minutes. Great! Three minutes to spare and that was with a very wide margin of safety. The Bible study ended at 9:00, but there was the fellowship and drive home.

Boneh returned to Gran's room. The gap in the shelf had caused another book to tilt on an angle. As Boneh straightened it and returned the other book, he noticed something odd. It wasn't a book at all, but a dark wooden box the same size and shape as book. Furthermore, by allowing it to tilt on its side, it had opened and the contents were slipping out.

Boneh pulled the box off the shelf to push the papers back in.

While doing so, he noticed the papers had different writing. It looked Arabic.

Nervously, he quickly riffled through the box. They appeared to be personal letters. There were even a few envelopes with Gran's name and address in English and a return address in . . .

He heard the front door open.

Boneh almost dropped the box. Hastily, he stuffed everything back in, hoping he wasn't rearranging anything and slipped the box back into its spot. He could hear Gran and Uncle Cawley talking downstairs.

Hurrying out of Gran's room, he momentarily couldn't remember whether her door had been open or shut. Shut. Carefully, he pulled the door behind him and tried to close it without making any noise. Gran was already coming up the stairs. He quickly started down the stairs, as if that had been his reason for being in the hallway.

"Hi Gran," he said, almost breathlessly.

"Hi, dear," she said absently. She opened the door to her room and went inside. Boneh desperately hoped that one of the letters wasn't lying on the floor or that anything was out of place.

He continued down the stairs.

“Did you have a good evening?” he asked Uncle Cawley. It was uncharacteristic of him to inquire about their evening out. He tried to cover it up with, “You’re home a bit early.”

“Yes, I guess we are,” said Uncle Cawley, glancing at the clock over the front door. “I don’t think your Gran will be going back to that study.”

“Why’s that?” asked Boneh, now genuinely curious.

“Those people just aren’t on her wavelength,” said Uncle Cawley vaguely, heading off to the kitchen. Boneh could see him put the kettle on for a cup of instant hot chocolate.

Now he had two mysteries. What were Gran and Uncle Cawley hiding from him? And why did Gran have problems with her Bible study group, of all things?



## Chapter Five

The girl in the hijab passed Boneh in the hallway.

He only knew that word, hijab, because he had taken the time to look up on the internet what the head scarves were called. She didn't look at him. But she didn't really look at anyone.

He had just handed in his paper on "The Future and Where I See Myself In It." Hopefully, all his anxiety over sneaking into Gran's room would result in a decent grade.

Today, all last-period classes had been cancelled to accommodate a pep rally out by the bleachers. The school soccer team had made it to the Ontario semi-finals and the principal had decided they needed an enthusiastic send-off. The cheerleaders would even be out. Mike had a crush on one of the cheerleaders so Boneh was sneaking off on his own. Boneh hated sports. Phys. Ed. had always been his worst subject. Give him a computer any day.

The tricky part of getting away with it was putting a little distance between you and the school without anyone noticing. Everyone was heading for the back of the school which meant

that if he went along the outside of the soccer field, he'd be noticed by everyone, including the teachers.

The front entrance opened up to a wide expanse of grass and walkways. Any teacher still in his or her classroom, glancing out the window, would see Boneh leaving. That left the side entrances. One of them went to the parking lot. The parking lot would risk an encounter with any teacher who had also decided to leave early.

That left the entrance on the side of the school that was furthest from Boneh's home. It's greatest advantage was that it was on the side of the school that was all brick, no windows. It would be a longer walk home, but worth it to get out of the pep rally.

At the end of the quiet hallway was another person who seemed to have the same plan as he did. The girl in the hijab! She was disappearing out the side door.

Impulsively, he hurried to catch up. What was it about her that made him want to talk to her?

Outside, he looked around quickly, both for the girl in the hijab and for any teachers. Nothing. But the girl could have only gone one way, down the pathway to an adjoining subdivision. Did she live in the subdivision or had she worked it all out in her mind like he had?

He hurried on.

At the end of the pathway, he came out onto a sidewalk. He spotted the girl in the hijab . . . going in the opposite direction he intended to.

Should he? Who knows where it might take him? Miles from his house. Instead of getting home early, he might get home abnormally late.

Why not? This might be the only chance he got to learn a little more about her. He had no idea why he wanted to, only that she was different. One thing's for sure, they could both agree that they didn't like pep rallies.

He was following her now.

Something clicked in his mind.

Maybe she spoke Arabic. Maybe she could read the letters in Gran's box . . .

She wasn't looking back which made it easier for him.

Soon they were out of the subdivision. So she didn't live there. But where was she heading?

They were now on a main road. It had apartment buildings and stores. Maybe she lived in one of the apartments. But after a short walk, she went into a pharmacy. He waited outside, reading the menu on the glass door of a small fish-and-chips restaurant. He read it three times. How long could it take to make a purchase?

Cautiously, he moved away from the restaurant and took a peek in the glass windows of the pharmacy. He couldn't see her. But there were aisles out of his sight.

Why not go in?

She hadn't seen him following her. She didn't know who he was.

He entered the store and a bell tinkled. A man – middle-aged and swarthy – glanced at him, gave him a small smile and returned his attention to some bottles he was stacking on a shelf behind the cash.

Moving around, Boneh couldn't see the girl anywhere. A young mother with a child in a stroller was looking at diapers. An older woman was examining bath salts. An older man was at the back, talking to the pharmacist about a prescription.

It occurred to Boneh that no one came into a pharmacy without a reason. He would have to buy something. Reaching into his pocket, he found a tooney and some pennies. That wouldn't go far. He scanned a rack of hair accessories. He could afford some bobby pins. Maybe Gran could use them. Not that she was a bobby pin kind of grandmother.

He moved down an aisle that had some energy drinks and bars. He selected a fruit and chocolate bar. Still looking around, he couldn't see the girl with the hijab. How could she have just disappeared like that? He went to the front and paid for his bar. He glanced back at the store interior. Still, no girl.

Reluctantly, he left.

He walked back along the main road until he came to a smaller street that he could use as a shortcut to get home. As it turned out, he got home at the same time he usually did.

Gran and Uncle Cawley were sharing a pot of tea in the kitchen. Today they seemed to be going through the newspapers

together. That was unusual. Usually Gran didn't bother with the newspapers.

Even more strange, the kitty litter box in the corner of the kitchen hadn't been cleaned. If there was one thing Gran was good about, it was taking care of all matters related to the cats.

Gran and Uncle Cawley both greeted him normally enough, but they suspended their conversation until he had grabbed some gingerbread men cookies from a bag on the counter and was going back upstairs. The litter box in the upstairs hallway hadn't been changed either. What was going on?

As if to confirm his concerns, he went into his room and found all the cats napping on his bed. Normally they had their afternoon nap on Gran's bed. But Gran's door was closed.

Cookie looked up and meowed.

Normally he didn't want cats – and cat hairs – on his bed. But today seemed to be a bad day for them. So he sat down and petted Cookie. Honey stretched awake with a big yawn. He was the fat male tom, afraid of nothing. Pudding and Cinnamon jumped down off his bed and went out into the hallway. Ginger, the mother, kept sleeping on his pillow.

He sat down at his desk and emptied his knapsack of its books. No need to get started on his homework right away. He had the whole weekend.

The pharmacy was on his mind. How could a girl go into a store and not come out? This was a new mystery. As if things weren't mysterious enough around here.

Cookie jumped onto his desk. She was the smallest of the kittens and Gran's favourite.

"What's going on, Cookie?" he said. "What's Gran up to?"

Cookie meowed.

He petted her head.

"I'm sure you'd tell me if you could."

Boneh got the surprise of his life when he came downstairs the next day. There was no Uncle Cawley sitting in his chair reading the weekend papers.

Boneh had slept in. Usually, the aroma of Uncle Cawley's French toast or Gran's toaster waffles woke him up. But today, the house had remained odorless. There wasn't even the smell of coffee in the air.

Boneh looked around the living room. There weren't any newspapers. Even if Uncle Cawley had gotten up to get himself a coffee, he would have left his papers everywhere.

Gran wasn't in the kitchen either. There was no sign of breakfast, although there were a couple of bowls of nearly finished cat food on the floor. So Gran had fed the cats, at least.

Boneh went back upstairs, concerned. Maybe they weren't feeling well.

Both their bedroom doors were shut.

Gently, he knocked on Gran's. Nothing. He knocked again, a bit louder. Still nothing.

"Uh, Gran!" he called out. No answer. He turned the knob and slowly opened the door. The bed was empty. So was the rest of the room.

Maybe it was Uncle Cawley. Maybe Uncle Cawley had had a heart attack! Maybe Gran had taken him to the hospital . . .

Barely bothering to knock, Boneh opened his uncle's door.

Same thing. Empty. Except his bed was made.

Well, that was a relief. A man having a heart attack wouldn't stop to make his bed.

Back downstairs. He opened the front door to see if the car was in the driveway. The weekend newspapers were all sitting on the front stoop in their plastic bags. And the car was gone.

Boneh went back inside and shut the door.

What was going on? Why hadn't they told him where they were going? And what could keep Uncle Cawley from his weekend papers?

He opened the door again and retrieved all the papers. They would be waiting for Uncle Cawley when he returned from wherever.

Boneh went back into the kitchen and noticed something he hadn't before. A note on the refrigerator.

*Dear Boneh, Drove your uncle to the airport. Back soon, Gran.*

The airport?!

So Uncle Cawley *had* been planning a trip! What was going on?

In the absence of clues, he decided to have breakfast. He sat down at the table with a bowl of cornflakes – usually a weekday thing. He missed the special Saturday morning breakfast.

Gran was back as he was putting his bowl in the dishwasher.

“Hi Gran,” he said, relieved to see her. Her hair was disheveled and she looked tired, although she was dressed nicely in a pair of black slacks and a matching turtleneck sweater.

“Want a coffee?” Boneh asked.

“I had one with your Uncle Cawley while we waited for his plane,” she said. She took a seat at the table. Boneh remained standing by the counter.

“Uh, why did Uncle Cawley go somewhere?” he asked.

“Business,” she said automatically. “No, personal. To see friends,” she corrected herself.”

“Oh,” said Boneh, who wasn’t aware that Uncle Cawley had any friends outside the house.

“I’m a bit tired, dear,” said Gran, standing up. “I think I’ll get some rest.”

That seemed to be all that he was going to get out of her about Uncle Cawley’s excursion.

## Chapter Six

Boneh spent a quiet weekend with Gran. Although Gran seemed distracted, she got out the checkerboard and they played a few games together on Saturday afternoon – something they hadn’t done since he was a little kid. They went to church on Sunday. Although Gran stayed put in the pew, she still acted strange. Usually she enjoyed the coffee and the talk afterward in the fellowship hall. But this time, they left right after the last hymn.

The pharmacy thing was still bugging him.

How could the girl in the hijab go in and then just disappear like that? It didn’t seem to be foul play because she was back at school on Monday.

There was something forbidden about the girl in the hijab. If he went up to her and started talking to her, he was sure he’d be rebuffed. If he was actually successful, he was sure an irate brother would appear to chop off some part of him.

For dinner that night, Boneh opened up a can of tomato soup and toasted two bagels.

“When’s Uncle Cawley coming back?” he asked, as he and Gran sat down at the kitchen table.

"It all depends," she said slowly. "Soon, I hope."

She sat staring at the wall, deep in thought.

Boneh picked up his spoon and started on his soup. Gran wasn't exactly a fountain of information. Still, he had learned that Uncle Cawley's return wasn't fixed. So that talk about friends, although it might be true, suggested that Uncle Cawley had gone somewhere for a reason and would come home when it was all finished. Whatever it was.

He was really at a disadvantage in trying to figure it out, though. Gran wasn't likely to talk to herself about whatever was going on. Boneh really should have put more effort into eavesdropping when she and Uncle Cawley had been having their quiet discussions.

"So how's school going, Boneh?"

"Fine, Gran," he said, truthfully.

There was silence as they ate. Then Boneh broke it with a question.

"Gran?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Are there many Muslims in this area?"

"What an interesting question." Gran sounded genuinely pleased that he had asked it. "Not many. A few, I would imagine. Why do you ask?"

"There's a girl at school who wears a hijab," he said.

Gran nodded as if she was familiar with the idea of hijabs.

"My pharmacist is a nice Muslim man," she said.

The pharmacy!

"Maybe this girl is related to him," said Boneh.

Gran nodded.

"When I go in on Saturdays," she said, "there's a young girl with a hijab working there sometimes. Maybe she's the same one."

Well that was one mystery solved.

The girl in the hijab worked at the pharmacy and was probably in some back room when he had gone in.

"I wouldn't mind getting some more pita bread and hummus," said Boneh.

"Yes," said Gran. "I'd like that too."

Gran seemed almost normal on Tuesday. Boneh made Kraft Dinner and Gran opened up some bagged salad.

It was still weird to sit down to dinner without Uncle Cawley, but at least the conversation centered on a familiar topic – the cats.

“Cinnamon got outside today,” said Gran.

“No way,” said Boneh. “She doesn’t usually try to do that, does she?”

Gran shook her head.

Keeping the indoor cats indoors was a big issue in their house. Except for their walk on a leash, Gran wanted them inside. But Honey and Cookie often made a dash for the door when it opened.

“Surprised the life out of me,” said Gran, adding some French dressing to her salad. “I knew the cats were upstairs napping so I wasn’t worried about any of them escaping. I went out to check the mail and when I turned to go back in, there was Cinnamon, just sitting on the stoop looking at me.”

Boneh laughed.

Usually the topic of the cats was a boring one, but today it represented normality.

“What happened then?” he asked.

“I scooped her up and brought her back in. Naughty little girl. At least she didn’t make a run for it.”

Boneh nodded.

Honey had once made a dash across the front yard, followed by a screaming Gran. She had stopped him with something that had resembled a football tackle. At the time, Boneh had died a thousand deaths at the thought of anyone who knew him witnessing such a spectacle. Now it seemed like the kind of memory that made them a family.

He had done his homework right after getting home, so when Gran suggested a movie after dinner, though surprised, he agreed. She had been to the library, which still stocked the old VHS movies. It was highly unusual for Gran to watch a movie in the evening. Usually, she was on her computer or with Uncle Cawley. But now she seemed restless, as if she wanted to kill time while she waited for the return of Uncle Cawley.

It was the original *South Pacific* and it came in two volumes. Gran made them both an instant hot chocolate and they settled

down for an evening of singing and dancing. It wasn't the type of thing Boneh would have selected, and he would have never admitted it, but he kind of enjoyed it.

"That was my favourite movie when I was a girl," said Gran, when it was over.

"I can understand that," said Boneh.

"Gran?" he said the next night, over a dinner of scrambled eggs and toasted English muffins.

"Yes, dear?"

A question for Gran had come to him in the middle of English Composition. Something that might contribute to a greater understanding. Now he put it to her.

"If you were going to learn any language, which one would it be?"

"Well, that's a good question, Boneh," she said, pausing in her eating. "Of course, we've all learned a bit of French in school, haven't we?"

He nodded. Although French wasn't exactly his strength.

"I wouldn't mind learning Italian." Gran went back to her eating.

"What languages do you know?" he probed. "Apart from English and French, I mean."

"Well," she said, focusing back on him. "Believe it or not, I know a bit of Arabic."

"Really?" Now they were getting somewhere.

Gran nodded as she added some butter to her English muffin.

"Working in the oil industry, I had a chance to meet some of the executives of the oil world, many who were Arabs. One of them in particular, took a bit of a shine to me and taught me some Arabic."

"Wow," said Boneh. This was a side of Gran he didn't know about.

"Of course, Grandpa didn't approve at all of such a thing," she said, her eyes sparkling. "I had to tell my friend that my husband was very jealous. Being a rather passionate man himself, he completely understood."

Boneh had never known his grandfather. He had died before Boneh was born.

“However . . .” Gran’s eyes were still sparkling. “My Arab friend got back in touch with me when he heard I was a widow. We attended many social events together and when he went back to the Gulf, he sent me letters . . .”

“In Arabic?” Boneh interrupted, and then regretted the slip.

“Oh yes,” said Gran who seemed too caught up in her own memories to notice. “It took me weeks to decipher them. But I did.”

“Then what happened?” Boneh asked.

“I became a Christian. Born again. I told my friend that my faith was important to me and that if we wanted to continue on with our relationship, we would have to share the same faith.”

Boneh had forgotten about his food.

“What happened next?” he asked.

“He sent me a letter, a long letter. He said my faith didn’t need to be an obstacle. We were both People of the Book, after all. He told me a lot about Islam and I took it all very seriously. I even read the Quran. But in the end, I had to face the fact that I believed that Jesus was the way to the Father and that my Muslim friend believed that he was merely one of many prophets.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Boneh.

Gran nodded. She got up to go to the fridge and get out a jar of marmalade.

“I think it all worked out for the best, though. It was close to the time that you came into my life. Can you imagine us living in Arabia right now?” She smiled.

He nodded slowly, and then he shook his head.

“No, I guess I can’t.”

Well, that explained the letters in the box. But it would still take a bit of thinking to get Gran to tell him where Uncle Cawley had gone to.

The week passed with Gran not bothering to go to her Bible study and both of them doing the grocery shopping so that Boneh could carry the huge bag of cat food. Normally, it was Uncle Cawley who did the grocery shopping. But even then, the topic of where he had gone didn’t come up.

Gran, however, did something different. She read Uncle Cawley’s newspapers every morning. It was more like she skimmed them, looking for something.

“Think Uncle Cawley might make the news, Gran?” said Boneh jokingly.

The look of surprise on her face startled him. He realized in a moment of clarity that she was indeed reading the papers to see if Uncle Cawley’s name was in them.

But then she recovered and smiled.

“Uncle Cawley knows how to stay out of trouble,” she said, her eyes continuing to run across every headline. But Boneh was left with an absolute conviction that Uncle Cawley was doing something that might make it to the newspapers. And that meant something big was going on.

Where on earth had Uncle Cawley gone? And what on earth was he doing?!

## Chapter Seven

An English Composition assignment to write a book review brought Boneh to the school library on Friday afternoon. They were free to choose any book they wanted. Boneh was considering a cookbook, if the library had any. It could be combined with expanding his culinary repertoire.

There were other students in the library, some like him, who needed a book to review. Others were checking out a display of the latest fiction – mostly vampire romance novels, not something that appealed to Boneh.

Walking down the centre aisle to get to the food section, Boneh was startled to see the girl in the hijab scanning one of the shelves.

Should he talk to her?

Too risky, he decided.

How 'bout just seeing what sort of books she liked to read? He turned down her aisle and pretended to be examining the books on the opposite shelf, right behind her. The girl in the hijab glanced at him, but must have considered him harmless. She was in the process of pulling a book off the shelf. She turned to leave. Boneh, desperate to see what she liked to read, grabbed a

book without looking at the title and followed. He was standing right behind her in the line to checkout their respective books.

The way she was holding her book, he could now see that it was *Hamlet*. Probably a school assignment. He sighed. Hardly a penetrating insight into her psyche. He glanced down at his. *An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*. He had a decision to make. Go and select another book. Stay behind her and try to, maybe, talk.

But if he tried to talk, what would he say? *I like hummus?*

Boneh turned away. He just wasn't ready for this right now.

He was glad he had returned to the shelves. Now home, at his desk, he was perusing his selection – a cookbook specifically designed for teens. This would definitely improve his and Gran's life – and Uncle Cawley's if he ever came back. Just for starters, there were breakfast burritos, an easy lasagna, chicken curry, basic chili, no-bake chocolate crunchies. If the recipes were as easy as they looked, this book would get a two-thumbs up in his review.

Breakfast burritos would require a trip to the grocery store to get the burritos, so the next morning, Boneh tried an oatmeal topped with applesauce and cinnamon. Gran liked it.

While Gran read the Saturday papers, he made up some more of the recipes in the book. He was limited by what they had in the cupboards and fridge, but he was able to make up a jug of fruity iced tea, some homemade granola bars and some garlic bread to go along with the brown beans for lunch.

"This is lovely, dear," said Gran, sipping the tea as they sat at the table.

"Thanks," he said. He told her about the book report. "I've got to get some more ingredients if I'm going to try anything else, though."

"Well, I have to get my tablets at the pharmacy this afternoon," she said. "Would you like to go to the grocery store after that?"

"Sure!" said Boneh, as enthusiastic about the pharmacy as he was about ingredients for the recipes.

After putting the dishes into the sink, they headed out the back door to the driveway.

"Off you get, Sugar," said Gran, unlocking her car door. The magnificent white tom was lounging on the hood of the car in

the afternoon sun. Sugar just stared and ignored both of them until the engine started. Then he leapt off and made for the woodpile.

The drive was short.

"Anything you need at the pharmacy, dear?" said Gran, as they pulled into one of the spots in front of the store.

"Uh, sure," said Boneh, not wanting to just sit in the car and wait. "I need some razors." He figured that would be a good reason to go inside. Gran wouldn't want to pick out razors for him.

While Gran went straight to the back to the pharmacist's counter, Boneh browsed until he found the razors. So far, no sign of the girl in the hijab, although the swarthy man was at the cash. Like Gran's pharmacist, he looked Middle Eastern.

Boneh selected a package of five razors, the store brand, and went to the front. Gran was still talking at the back. This was disappointing. No girl.

As the man was ringing up his purchase, the bell over the door jingled. Boneh glanced at it. It was her!

He stared and then realized she was looking at him.

"Uh, hi," he said. "We go to the same school."

"I know," she said, going right past him and continuing down an aisle. She was heading for the back room. Now the man who had taken his five-dollar bill was handing him his change and looking at him with suspicion. Boneh turned away from the doorway the girl in the hijab had disappeared into.

"Thanks," he said, trying to sound casual, normal. Gran was certainly taking her time. He would wait for her outside by the car.

Gran came out with a small white paper bag. Her hypertension tablets. Or something like that. Boneh wasn't entirely sure. She just called them her tablets.

"Did you have a nice talk?" asked Boneh, as they were backing out of the space. He was curious.

"Oh yes. Mr. Hafiz is very knowledgeable. We always have a nice chat."

"Hafiz," said Boneh. "Is that Arabic?"

Gran nodded as she pulled out onto the main road. "Hafiz is Arabic for a man who has memorized the Quran. I don't know if

Mr. Hafiz has memorized the Quran, but I just heard that somewhere.”

“That girl with the hijab,” said Boneh. “She goes to my school.”

“Yes, I noticed her,” said Gran. “I asked Mr. Hafiz about her because you had mentioned a girl with a hijab. She’s his niece.”

That was interesting.

“I think that man at the front might be related to them too,” said Boneh.

“Yes, I think that’s Mr. Hafiz’s brother,” said Gran. She put on her flicker and moved into the left lane to turn into the strip mall that had a large grocery store at one end. “So that probably means the girl is his daughter.”

That would explain the bad vibes he got from the man. For showing an interest in his daughter. Oh well. He didn’t want to marry her. He just wanted to get to know her a bit, find out what it was like to be in a completely different world. Did she like the kind of music he did? Did she watch things on YouTube? Did she wear the hijab because she wanted to or because she had to?

It was kind of like hummus.

It was out there. And when you tried it, you realized it was good. Maybe there were other things he was missing out on. He just wanted to know.

Coming home from the grocery store, he had the ingredients for the easy lasagna, which he made for dinner. The next morning, it was the breakfast burritos.

Sunday afternoon was used to write the book review.

For dinner, he made an easy cheese fondue out of Cheese Whiz, seasoned with some pesto. They dipped chunks of bread into it while they watched the news on television. Another unusual event.

“Uncle Cawley would like this,” said Gran, reaching for another chunk of bread. “You’ll have to make it when he gets back.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?” asked Boneh.

“Soon,” said Gran. “I hope,” she added.

## Chapter Eight

**B**oneh passed the girl with the hijab in the hallway. At first, he thought she was just going to outright ignore him. Then, as he made eye contact with her, there was a slight smile from her.

*Yes!*

He didn't know why it had this effect on him. But somehow, the smile from her seemed of greater value than a lot more from another girl.

Not that he knew much about girls. One girlfriend in grade school, a semi-romance in middle school and nothing much since arriving at high school. And Mike provided him with very little insight into the topic of what it took to attract a girl.

Not that his interest in the girl in the hijab was the standard kind. It was more like she represented something beyond his little world. With his father in Iraq, he had always known there was a world outside of Canada. And now he couldn't shake the feeling that his life would somehow reach beyond Gran's house and might take him beyond Canada too.

When he got home from school, Gran was in the basement. He heard her moving around and called out, "I'm home."

“Boneh!” She came up the stairs, looking pleased to see him. Carefully, she shut the door behind her. “I’ve got good news! Uncle Cawley emailed me today. He’s well!”

“That’s great!” said Boneh. He went along with it and didn’t ask *why shouldn’t Uncle Cawley be well?* Gran was pleased and that’s what mattered.

For dinner, he turned a loaf of French bread into a pizza with some tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese, olives and salami. He had finished his book report, but he was holding onto the cookbook. The ones that were good – so far, all of them – he was typing up on his computer.

After dinner, Gran took Honey out for a walk. Boneh quickly washed their plates and glasses and then left the kitchen.

The door to the basement was still shut. As he passed by, it nagged him. What was down there?

He glanced at the front door. Gran had been gone for about ten minutes. She could be back in five minutes or twenty-five, depending on Honey’s stamina. He was the tom, and on the heavy side, so Gran never took him too far in case she had to carry him back. The ladies, more lithe and lean, could go further and were light enough to carry back over longer distances.

He would have to be quick.

Opening the door, he hurried down the stairs, almost losing his balance. In the dim light, he could see only boxes. There were some couches pushed up against the wall, but even piled on them were more boxes. Did he have time to look in the boxes?

*No, not today*, he decided.

He shouldn’t be down here. What would Gran say if she caught him? He ran back upstairs, slightly out of breath. No sign of Gran and Honey, although Pudding and Cinnamon came over to look at him and circle around his legs. Then out of nowhere came Cookie. Smallest of the cats, she moved fast and dashed down the stairs to the basement before he had a chance to stop her.

Oh no!

He would have to go back downstairs to retrieve her.

But just then, there was a noise at the front door. Gran was back! Quickly, Boneh shut the basement door and started heading up to his room. He would have to rescue Cookie later.

“Hi Gran,” he called out, as she and Honey came into the foyer.

“Hi, dear,” she said, bending over to release Honey from his leash. His two sisters came over to sniff him after his outdoor adventure.

Boneh spent the next hour in his room finishing some math homework. They were done with geometry and had moved on to some advanced algebra.

But his mind was on the boxes. What was in them? Was it possible they were just surplus storage? But who stored things in boxes like that? As far as he knew, this had always been Gran’s home. There had never been a major move, the kind that might mean that some things would still be in their boxes. Perhaps the boxes were from Uncle Cawley’s former life. He hadn’t lived here when Gran had been married. But if the boxes belonged to Uncle Cawley, why would Gran be downstairs going through the contents?

And more immediately, there was the matter of Cookie. How was he going to get her out of there before she used one of the boxes for her litter?

He came out of his room to see what Gran was up to. He expected her to be on her computer in the bedroom, but she was downstairs in the living room with a mug of hot chocolate, reading her Bible. Cinnamon and Pudding were by her feet.

“Would you like some hot chocolate, dear?” she asked.

“Uh, no thanks,” said Boneh. “I just came down to say goodnight.”

He was now imagining a midnight rescue for Cookie, sometime after Gran had gone to bed.

He leaned down to kiss Gran on the cheek.

At that moment, there was a loud scuffling sound. Immediately, Cinnamon and Pudding dashed over to the basement door and started sniffing at the bottom.

*They know*, thought Boneh. *They know their sister is trapped.*

Gran looked up, puzzled. Then she got out of her chair to investigate. It was obvious that the action centred on the basement door. She opened it and out dashed Cookie.

“Why there you are!” she said to Cookie, who had now paused in the middle of the living room to reproachfully look at the humans. “I was wondering where you’d gotten to! Poor dear!

Were you in there all this time? I didn't even see you come down!"

She crouched down to pet Cookie's petite head.

Boneh realized with relief that Gran thought Cookie had gotten trapped down in the basement by her, not him.

Discreetly, he returned to his room.

Final exams came and kept Boneh confined to his room. At the back of his mind, he was aware that Gran was worried about Uncle Cawley. After two weeks of intense studying, Boneh was ready to worry too.

It was the end of June – summer holidays – and he still had no uncle. It was additionally vexing because Uncle Cawley had promised to talk to a former editor and try get Boneh a job at a paper – not writing articles but just doing research for some of the reporters.

That night at dinner – the first night that he didn't have to hit the books afterwards – he brought up the topic of Uncle Cawley. They were eating Reuben sandwiches, one of Gran's few specialties. She had been making dinner for the last two weeks to give Boneh more time to study. In fact, she seemed to appreciate the extra task, as if it helped her to get her mind off of her brother's absence.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I suppose I should just tell you everything. I don't know when Uncle Cawley is coming back. I don't even know if he's still alive."

Boneh's eyes widened.

Gran used her serviette to dab an eye.

"I've been at a loss as to what to do, though . . ."

"But why, Gran?" Boneh asked. His sandwich was forgotten. "I mean, can't you just phone him wherever he is . . .?"

Gran shook her head.

"He's entirely out of reach, I'm afraid. He could be in prison, for all I know."

Words failed Boneh.

"But how would Uncle Cawley end up in prison? Where on earth did he go?"

"To Iraq, dear."

## Chapter Nine

*I*raq?! What, like, do you mean to be with Dad?"

"No, dear. Not with your father. In fact, if your father knew he was there, he would probably be the first to toss him into the nearest prison."

"But why? Why did Uncle Cawley go there?"

Gran took a deep breath.

"I guess I can tell you," she said. "But it's a secret."

"I can keep a secret," he said.

"I know, dear," she said. "In fact, I was thinking that I should have told you this sooner. In many ways, this is your story too."

He was completely mystified.

"You see," she said. "Uncle Cawley is smuggling Bibles into Iraq."

"*Bibles into Iraq?*" he repeated, hardly able to believe what he was hearing.

She nodded.

"It's what we do," she said. "Particularly as the region turns more and more into a part of the world that persecutes Christians."

"I thought you might be secret agents," Boneh said. It was the only thing he could think of.

"I guess we are, in a way," said Gran. "Secret agents for Jesus." She smiled.

"But how? Why . . .?"

"When I was going through the darkness of losing your mother . . ." Gran pushed away the plate that had her half-eaten sandwich and put her elbows up on the table. "Jesus was the only one who came to me and comforted me. And he came to me through the Bible. I had that old Bible sitting around for years, but I had never bothered to read it. I was baptized as a child and that had always seemed good enough for me."

Boneh just listened quietly.

"That got me thinking . . . I knew a lot about what was going on in the world in the regions that had oil. My job didn't require me to know these things, I was just curious and liked to read a lot. I knew that oil was underneath the countries that seemed to have a lot of conflict."

Boneh nodded as Gran continued.

"So when your mother died and I started reading my Bible, it made me think that maybe the Bible could help those people too, like it had helped me. A lot of mothers have lost a lot of children . . ."

Boneh took his Gran's hand. At this moment, she didn't look like his Gran. He could see her as a person, a person who had had to endure a huge loss when his own mother had died.

"But a lot of Christians around the world don't even have a Bible to read," Gran said, patting his hand. "I wanted to be part of something that would bring Bibles to every Christian who didn't have one."

When his Gran looked a little more like his Gran again, he asked her, "What about Uncle Cawley?"

Gran smiled.

"Uncle Cawley always hated injustice," she said. "That's why he became a journalist. What really bugged him was that some countries don't have freedom of the press. I think you can understand that the countries that don't have that freedom are the same countries that don't allow Bible into them. At first, he thought I was crazy for wanting to smuggle Bibles, but I won him around in the end. And I think he started to enjoy himself."

Gran's eyes were sparkling. "Especially when we got some of the people in our Bible study group involved. We started putting our money and our energies into connecting with pastors in areas of the world that my company was in. I had friends all over the world because of my job and I started with them, putting out feelers. Soon we had a small network of people who wanted to put Bibles into the hands of Christians."

"But why did you have problems at church?"

"Because recently the people in the Bible study group switched their focus. Lots of younger people have started attending and they're an evangelical lot. They feel guilty if they aren't telling people about Jesus. They wanted to make it more of an evangelical mission, giving away Bibles to Muslims as well as Christians."

"And you didn't like that?"

Gran shook her head.

"My belief was, that would put our friends in danger. Our Christian friends. You see, in all these countries we were working in, there were laws about converting to Christianity. If you tried to win someone to Christ, you could be put in prison or even executed."

Boneh's eyes widened.

"My feeling was that we should put the Bibles into the hands of Christians and then leave it up to the Holy Spirit how they should use them," she said.

Boneh nodded.

"I can see that."

"So Uncle Cawley and I decided to do it ourselves. That's why he went out on his own. We have a basement full of Arabic Bibles and they need to get out there somehow. Uncle Cawley was delivering them to a pastor in a small church just outside of Baghdad. Normally, I'm able to email the pastor, but something's gone wrong. He doesn't answer his emails. Oh, Boneh!" His Gran burst out. "Please pray for your Uncle Cawley tonight, before you go to bed!"

"I will, Gran," he promised.

Boneh's mind was on Uncle Cawley, but it was also on all of those Arabic Bibles in the boxes in the basement. If only there was some way he could give one to the girl in the hijab!

A day ago, it would have been a terrifying thought – to want to give a Bible to *anyone*. But compared to Uncle Cawley willing to risk imprisonment in Iraq, it seemed like a relatively harmless undertaking.

If school had still been on, he could have sat with her at lunch and given it to her. But now that it was summer, going to the pharmacy was his only option.

Somehow, he didn't want to share his plan with Gran. After all, it was her pharmacist's niece and he didn't want her implicated in any way should the whole thing go sour. It would be no great loss to him to never go to the pharmacy again.

So the next morning, when Gran was out on a walk with Pudding, he went back down to the basement. This time he did it with far less trepidation. He felt he wasn't being sneaky now that he knew the full story.

Sure enough, the boxes contained Bibles in the distinctive Arabic script. He picked one out and returned to his room with it. Setting it on his desk, he just looked it. Gran and Uncle Cawley certainly believed in this book. Without ever really analyzing it, he realized he had always believed in it too.

His father didn't have this book and his father's life was dark.

Gran had this book and despite the loss of her daughter, she had remained light and hopeful. All their quirks aside, Gran and Uncle Cawley had loved him as much as any parents would have. They were strange, to be sure, but they were never harsh.

So it was worth trying to put this book into someone else's hands. If the girl in the hijab thought he was a nutcase, oh well. It's not like she talked to him anyhow. For that matter, she didn't talk to anyone.

Obviously Gran didn't want to lose her brother, but Boneh had already decided – somewhere deep in his heart – that if the worst had happened to Uncle Cawley, then he would replace him. He and Gran would do it together. It came partly from a sense of family honour and partly from a sense that he had nothing better to do with his time.

The next day, after a meal of breakfast burritos, Boneh and Gran did something they had never done before. They prayed together. Gran prayed for the safe return of Uncle Cawley and Boneh vigorously *amen*ed it.

Gran had an appointment with her optometrist. After she left, Boneh set out for the pharmacist, the Arabic Bible in a plastic bag.

He was doing something Gran had vigorously opposed – giving a Bible to a Muslim. But she had opposed it on the grounds that it would put the Christians in danger. Here in Canada, that wasn't a factor. So his missionary work didn't seem like a violation of anything.

It crossed his mind that the girl in the hijab's father might not appreciate his mission, however.

Oh well. He wouldn't make a show of it. And if he couldn't do it discreetly, he wouldn't do it at all. In fact, he had ten dollars in his pocket today, enough to do a bit of shopping to explain his presence in the pharmacy.

Which was good, because when he arrived at the pharmacy, there was no sign of the girl. His plastic bag under his arm, he browsed the aisles, selecting a new toothbrush. He took a while picking the colour – finally settling on blue – all the while, surveying the store. No girl. But the man at the front on the cash was watching him. Gran's pharmacist in the back was too busy with a customer to be paying attention to him.

Finally, Boneh had to admit defeat.

He picked out a package of breath mints by the cash, just to bolster his purchase. The man accepted his ten-dollar bill and gave him the appropriate change. Boneh briefly toyed with the idea of handing him the bag and asking him to give it to his daughter. Even if he told him it was a school thing, he doubted it would get to her without her father examining it first.

Through the glass doors and out into the mid-morning sun, he paused to unwrap the mints and pop one into his mouth.

He almost choked on it.

The girl in the hijab was coming, carrying a cardboard tray of coffees from a doughnut shop at the end of the little mall. Boneh quickly moved away from the glass front of the pharmacy to get out of sight of the man at the cash register.

"Hi there!" he said, before he lost courage.

She looked startled but then recovered. She gave him a small smile.

"I'm Boneh," he said. "It's a strange name, I know. But I just thought you'd like to know . . ."

She looked like she just wanted to go around him with her hot coffees.

“Um . . .” he said. In two more steps, she would be within sight of her father. “I have something for you.”

She paused, unprepared for this turn in the conversation.

He held out the bag. Hesitantly, she took it.

She was just staring at him.

Then she handed him the cardboard tray. He took it while she opened the bag.

“I can’t accept this,” she said, quickly wrapping the book back up and taking her tray.

“I know,” he said. “You’re Muslim, right? But it’s a cool book. Do you read Arabic? I could get one in English . . .”

“It’s not that,” she said quickly. “My father won’t let me have it.”

“I know, I know,” he said again. “But maybe we could get together and I could tell you a bit about it. It’s a really interesting book.”

“Oh, I know,” she said. Despite that there was no one around, her voice suddenly dropped. “I know all about it. I am a Christian.”

## Chapter Ten

The girl was gone. Into the pharmacy with her tray of coffee.  
And no further elaboration.

Boneh was left standing on the small sidewalk that ran the length of the stores. He chose to walk in the direction that would take him away from the pharmacy, not past its window. He didn't want it to be known that he had had an encounter with her.

*A Christian?*

He didn't know much about Islam, but he did know that the hijab was a Muslim tradition, not a Christian one. What was going on?

Now maybe it was his turn to let Gran in on *his* secret. She knew more about this world than he did.

He got home before Gran and started lunch – an avocado chicken salad made with some leftovers. He was arranging it on lettuce when Gran came in.

"This looks lovely, dear," she said, giving him a kiss on his cheek. She sat right down at the table.

"How was the optometrist?" he asked, bringing the two plates over and joining her.

"I need a new prescription," she said. "Uncle Cawley was supposed to go with me to that appointment. He probably needs a new prescription too."

Boneh nodded solemnly.

After a quick prayer by Gran, they started on the salads.

"And how was your morning, dear?" Gran asked.

Boneh took a deep breath and told her everything.

Her eyebrows went up, but Boneh thought he detected amusement in her eyes.

"Well, dear," she said when he was done. "You're right. The hijab is not a Christian tradition. But I can say this, some Christian women wear them in countries where it's dangerous to be one."

Boneh nodded slowly.

"But Canada isn't one of those countries," he said.

"True," said Gran. "Which means it's something else." Gran looked down at her salad. "Perhaps it's only the girl who's Christian. And perhaps her father doesn't know."

Boneh nodded.

"I was thinking about that on the way home. I mean, I was thinking about Dad and how he's not so hot on Christians. Maybe her father's the same way."

"Could be," said Gran. She got up and went to the refrigerator to pour herself some iced tea. "So be careful. Don't do anything that might put her in jeopardy."

"I won't," said Boneh. "I wish I knew more about her, like where she hangs out. I don't think I should go back to the pharmacy."

Gran nodded.

"Of course, I'm free to come and go as I please. Perhaps I can find out some more for you," she said.

"Thanks Gran!" said Boneh.

That out of the way and with no Uncle Cawley to help him get a summer job, Boneh was stuck. All summer job positions were already filled, as he found out when he made a half-hearted effort to go around the neighbourhood the next day with his resume.

He even passed by the pharmacy on his tour of the various stores. But he didn't want to draw attention to himself by looking in the glass window.

He came home in the late afternoon to find Gran up in her room, on the computer.

"Anything from Uncle Cawley?" he called in. Her door was ajar.

"No, I'm afraid not, dear," she called back.

Boneh went into his room.

Perhaps he could find something to do for the summer online. He spent until dinner searching ways to make money online. Most of it sounded dubious. Selling things on eBay was a legitimate possibility, but he didn't have anything to sell. Becoming a YouTube star was something he toyed with for only a few seconds. Creating a website and putting advertising on it was a possibility. The only problem with that was that the best sites were the ones put together by someone with some expertise in an area. He didn't have any.

Finally, he leaned back.

No one was putting pressure on him to get a job. Even Uncle Cawley had just suggested it as a way to alleviate boredom, not to make a load of money. His dad sent him a regular allowance, over and above what he sent to Gran.

Boneh went downstairs to start on dinner. The cookbook was back at the school library. Maybe tomorrow he would go to the public library and get another one. If he couldn't get a job, he could at least work on his cooking skills.

Tonight he made something called a tuna melt.

When Gran came down and tried it, she declared it delicious and said it was something her mother used to make.

It was a surprise to Boneh that the recipe had been around for that long.

"Oh yes," said Gran, nodding. "I'm sure you'll find that there's very little that's new under the sun. Most of the recipes nowadays are variations on past ones. This one is a little more seasoned than the kind my mother would make, but I think I like it better."

Boneh was gratified. Maybe he could do a YouTube cooking show.

Gran seemed content to make it an early night. Boneh went up to his room and considered a Netflix subscription for his

computer. But then he would be like Mike, in front of his computer for the entire summer.

No, he decided. This would be the summer of the girl in the hijab. She seemed like she needed a friend.

Over a breakfast of Morning Glory muffins and tea, he told Gran he was going back to the pharmacy.

"I think she needs a friend," he explained to Gran. "I'm going to give it a try."

He gave Gran full points for not trying to dissuade him.

"OK, dear," she said, getting up to go to her purse on the counter. "Buy some toothpaste while you're there."

He nodded as he took the money. So far, making small purchases was the only strategy he had. For the price of a coffee, he could also stakeout the nearby doughnut shop in the hope that she would be sent out on another coffee run.

Gran returned to the table and her muffin.

They ate in silence, both in thought.

"Make friends with the father," Gran suddenly said.

Boneh looked at her in surprise. That was the last thing he wanted to do. But it made sense. The father perceived him as a threat. So make friends with the father, not the daughter. It was a strategy that would have never occurred to him.

He headed out with lightness in his heart. A few months ago, he wouldn't have had the courage to launch out on such an expedition, but Uncle Cawley had put it all in perspective. If Uncle Cawley could risk his life in Iraq, he could put himself out a bit and connect with someone.

His confidence dipped slightly as he entered the store. The man was there at the cash, not exactly glaring at him, but not exactly radiating warmth. The girl in the hijab was nowhere to be seen. Gran's pharmacist had his eyes on bottles, not the customers. There was a woman with a baby in a stroller looking at formula. Boneh turned down the toothpaste aisle where an older couple were discussing denture cleansers. Boneh picked out the brand of toothpaste that was normally used in their household and took it to the front. Still no girl in the hijab. But he wasn't here to see the girl in the hijab.

The man at the cash rang up his purchase and put it in a small paper bag. It was now or never and Boneh's mind had gone blank.

The man handed him the bag.

"I like hummus," Boneh blurted out.

The man just stared at him. His eyes widened. Boneh could feel his own face turning red.

And then the man laughed. A big belly laugh.

"I like it too," he said.

Boneh grinned.

"I cook," he said. "For me and my Gran. This is her pharmacy," he explained, hoping it would legitimize his presence. "She likes hummus and pita bread and I was hoping you could tell me where the best place to get hummus is."

"That's easy," said the man, still smiling. "There is a little bakery on Rashid Street that sells the finest hummus in the world."

"Rashid Street?" said Boneh.

"In Baghdad," the man explained, still cordial. "But if you can't go to Baghdad, you can make it yourself in a blender."

The man leaned forward, elbows on the counter.

"The secret is to get the best tahini you can. Sesame paste. You can make that too. Sesame seeds and olive oil. Use the best olive oil. Very good." The man kissed his fingers.

"I'll do that," said Boneh nodding. "Thanks!"

The man nodded.

"Let me know how it goes," he said.

"I will," promised Boneh.

Gran laughed.

"Sounds like it went well."

Boneh had just told her the story. Now he had two printed sheets of paper in his hand. One for tahini and one for hummus. He was going to try both once he had the ingredients.

"I guess they're from Iraq," said Boneh. "It's probably not a good idea to tell him my dad's there right now."

"Probably not," agreed Gran. "In fact, it's something I'm rather ashamed of. The American troops have made life very hard for the Christians in Iraq."

"You mean they harass them?" asked Boneh.

Gran shook his head.

“No. But the occupation by the Americans is unpopular in Iraq. And since the Americans are associated with the Christian religion, the Christians in Iraq are then associated with the occupation.”

“I see what you mean,” said Boneh slowly. Whether his dad liked it or not, he was a representative of Christian culture. “So then it becomes patriotic to be a good Muslim.”

“That’s a good way of putting it,” said Gran.

The next day, Boneh had the ingredients for hummus, as well as a bag of fresh pita bread from the grocery store. Gran hadn’t come along, but had given him enough money to also buy some canned cat food. The indoor cats got some canned food mixed in with their dry food.

Gran’s blender seemed to go back to the 1950’s. Probably a wedding present. Sitting in a cupboard, it was clean and shiny from disuse.

He started with the tahini, running the blender on the highest setting until he had a smooth paste. The paste went into a mason jar – another item that looked like it had sat untouched since Gran’s earliest days in the house.

Then he set to work on the hummus – chickpeas, olive oil, lemon juice, fresh garlic. In addition to salt and pepper, he had read that cumin also made a nice addition to hummus.

To it all, he added the tahini.

“Hmm,” he said as he sampled it, once it had been pureed to an almost creamy paste. “Not bad. Quite good, in fact.”

Gran agreed with him. Along with the pita bread, Boneh had sliced some tomatoes and cucumbers. They went along nicely with the hummus.

“It’s a winner,” she said. She looked at the large bowl on the counter that had the remaining hummus. “I guess we’ll be eating it for a while, eh?”

“Actually,” said Boneh, grinning. “I thought I’d take some of it over to the pharmacy.”

Boneh set out the next day with a mason jar full of hummus. Also in the small bag was the remaining pita bread.

This time, when he arrived at the pharmacy, he saw the girl in the hijab at the back of the store, sweeping. His heart lifted. He had almost forgotten his original reason for coming here.

But today, he had other things on his mind. He went straight to the man at the cash.

“Well, hello, my friend,” said the man, smiling. “More toothpaste?”

Boneh shook his head as he pulled out the mason jar.

“I wanted an expert’s opinion,” he said. He put the bag of pita bread on the counter too.

The man looked at him and then down at the jar. He untwisted the lid. Breaking off some of the bread, he dipped it into the jar.

Boneh was watching him.

The man tasted the hummus and then nodded slowly.

“Not bad,” he said. He was sincere. “Not as good as Rashid Street, but the best I’ve had since coming to Canada.”

“Thanks!” said Boneh. It was quite the compliment for a first-time effort. There was a lady behind him who wanted to purchase an armful of bubble baths and shampoos and conditioners. Boneh grinned at the man and headed for the door, leaving him the hummus and pita bread. Though ringing up the lady’s purchases, the man was still watching him. He gave Boneh a wave and a smile as he exited. Boneh waved back and headed home.

The next time he went to the pharmacist’s, Gran went with him. Her optometrist had given her a prescription for eye drops that she hadn’t gotten around to filling. It had been three days since he had delivered his hummus. He had been using his days to read about Iraq – both its history and its present-day conditions. A blog by an anonymous American soldier gave him an idea of what sort of things his dad was facing. Theoretically, his father was part of a multinational team that was there in a peacekeeping capacity, but from what he had read online, anyone could come under fire, especially if they wore a military uniform.

The bell tinkled as they entered the pharmacy. The man at the cash looked over and saw Boneh. His smile of welcome was broad.

“Good day, my friend!”

Boneh grinned and returned the greeting.

"This is my Gran," he said.

"I have seen your lovely grandmother here before," said the man.

Boneh stayed at the front while Gran went to her pharmacist in the back.

"Since you are so good at making hummus," said the man, "I strongly recommend you try some of our other recipes."

The pharmacy was quiet today so he could talk.

"I'd love to," said Boneh. "What do you recommend?"

"You could start with a baba ghanoush. Roasted eggplant blended with lemon juice and tahini. A bit of salt. A bit of pepper. A bit of garlic. A bit of oil." For a moment, the man's eyes rolled with delight at the thought.

"I could do that," said Boneh, nodding. His days were certainly free enough. "Do you eat it with pita bread?"

"Yes, just like hummus. Once you can do hummus and baba ghanoush, you are on your way to a full meze."

"A full meze?" said Boneh.

The man nodded.

"Yes, that is what we call it. A selection of all sorts of small dishes to serve with bread. "Kibbeh, muhammarah, tabbouleh, salata, olives, feta cheese . . ." The man was checking off his fingers as he recited the list.

Boneh was intrigued.

"I could do that," he said again. This was stretching him beyond the teenager's cookbook, but he liked it.

"Do you need recipes?" the man asked, concerned.

Boneh shook his head.

"I get recipes off the internet."

The man nodded, satisfied.

"Just make sure they are the real thing, yes? Arab recipes."

"I will," promised Boneh.

Gran came to the cash to pay for her eye drops and after an exchange of warm wishes with the man, they left the pharmacy.

It wasn't until he got outside that Boneh realized he hadn't even looked around for the girl in the hijab.

## Chapter Eleven

The next week was an excursion into a foreign world. Boneh was online, searching through Arab recipes and printing off everything that looked good.

Gran was a willing guinea pig.

Boneh even ventured into desserts – knafeh and baklava.

“You have quite the talent, dear,” said Gran, after one of their evening feasts. “Perhaps it’s time to cook for company.”

Boneh’s eyebrows went up.

Gran nodded.

“I could do the inviting as long as you do the cooking.”

“Sure,” said Boneh, forgetting that he normally didn’t like people coming over and seeing all their cats. “I mean, wow. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“You’re too good a cook to just spoil me,” said Gran. “I’ll invite my pharmacist and his brother for tonight and tell them to bring whoever they want.”

Boneh nodded. His mind was racing. The girl in the hijab could end up right here in his house!

He stood up, taking his plate to the sink. But that wasn’t what he wanted to think about. If Gran convinced her pharmacist and

his brother to come here, then he had some serious cooking to do.

Gran was off once again to the pharmacist. Boneh stayed in the kitchen to launch on preparation for a full meze, should the big event take place.

After making a blenderful of hummus, he returned to his room for an Arabic Almond Cookie recipe he had saved on his computer. Now might be a good time to try it. Baklava required a package of phyllo dough and he didn't have any left.

Boneh printed off the recipe.

His email icon told him he had a message. Usually it was spam. But it could be Mike. Impulsively, he clicked the icon.

But what he saw made him lean forward, mouth agape.

The name of the sender wasn't familiar but the name at the bottom of the message was. Uncle Cawley!

*Boneh, my boy he read. All is well. Can't say too much. Gran's probably told you about my excursion. Just want you to know, keep your chin up. Sorry about the job with the paper. Should have thought about that before I left. Maybe next summer. Take good care of Gran. Uncle Cawley. P.S. Don't reply to this. Don't know if I'll be back this way again.*

Keep your chin up. That was one of the things Uncle Cawley used to say to him as a boy on their way to school. Boneh just hoped Uncle Cawley wasn't in some kind of danger. Keep your chin up usually meant stay cheerful when things were tough.

Boneh exhaled.

Gran probably had an email waiting for her. Well, it meant Uncle Cawley was alive and that was good.

Gran was back a few minutes after he had returned to the kitchen. She arrived with several bags of pita bread and an announcement that her pharmacist and his brother, who was also Mr. Hafiz, would be coming to dinner tonight.

As exciting as the news was, Boneh's news was bigger.

"Uncle Cawley emailed me!"

Gran's eyes widened.

"He's OK," said Boneh. "He didn't tell me much, but he's OK!"

Gran put her purse and the bags of pita bread on the counter before hurrying upstairs to her computer. Sure enough, Uncle Cawley had sent her a message too.

Gran came downstairs a few minutes later and put the kettle on for a cup of tea.

"Yes, you're right," she said. "He didn't say much but he's OK. And that's all that matters."

Gran was the first to try an almond cookie when they came out of the oven.

"They're lovely, dear," she said. She was visibly more cheerful now that she had heard from her brother. Boneh was glad. Now maybe she could really enjoy their dinner that night. Right now, he was too busy making baba ghanoush to wonder whether the girl in the hijab would be coming too.

The pharmacy closed at nine, so it would be a late dinner. But Gran said that Arabs often ate later, particularly in the hot countries where the temperature would become more temperate at night.

It was just as well the dinner was set for such a late hour. It gave Boneh more time. He was even able to go online and get a recipe for mint tea, as well as an Arabic-style coffee scented with cardamom. Gran was game enough to make a last minute trip to the grocery store for mint and cardamom.

At 8:45, Boneh said a quick prayer to God that whatever happened, it would be good.

But nothing he had anticipated prepared him for what was ahead.

Gran came downstairs looking completely not like Gran. She was wearing a long, flowing sky-blue dress trimmed with fancy embroidery.

"It's called an abaya," she said to Boneh, twirling around so he could see it front-to-back. "Do you like it?"

"Gran, you look great," said Boneh sincerely. "But where did you get it?"

"It was a gift from a friend," she said smiling.

*Must be the friend Grandpa got upset about,* thought Boneh.

But there was more to come.

When the doorbell rang and Gran answered it, she said to her pharmacist and to Mr. Hafiz, "Ahlan wa sahan!"

Mr. Hafiz took one look at her and burst into a symphony of Arabic. And Gran was smiling and responding as if she understood every word. It was such a sight that Boneh almost didn't notice the girl in the hijab behind her father.

She nodded shyly to Boneh and he nodded back.

When they were all inside, they were invited to sit down in the living room. Boneh had put out some bowls of nuts and dried fruit, another idea from the internet. Gran's pharmacist and the girl in the hijab nibbled out of the bowls while Gran and Mr. Hafiz continued to talk.

"Oh, but excuse me," said Mr. Hafiz, when there was a pause. "I have not made introductions. You have not met my daughter, Leila."

"Pleased to meet you," said Leila to both Boneh and Gran.

Boneh decided it wouldn't be wise to pay too much attention to Leila. Besides, he was too fascinated by Gran's performance. It was like she was a different person. She even looked ten years younger.

Mr. Hafiz certainly seemed to be enchanted.

Although the conversation carried on in English, it was peppered with Arabic expressions.

Boneh learned that Mr. Hafiz and Leila had come from Baghdad several months ago. They were hoping to make their life in Canada, but things were up in the air. They had left family behind and unless they could somehow get their family out of Iraq, Mr. Hafiz felt they would have to go back. Leila's mother wasn't mentioned, though.

Gran suggested they move into the kitchen where the food was all laid out.

"This is wonderful!" said Mr. Hafiz, looking at the kitchen table. "I have not seen anything like this since Baghdad!"

The table was filled with all the Arabic dishes Boneh had mastered, including a last minute addition – some falafels seasoned and fried in oil.

When they had all filled their plates and returned to the living room, Gran was quick to keep the conversation going.

"And do you do the cooking for your father, Leila?" she asked.

Boneh, returning to the kitchen to bring out some cold drinks, strained to hear her soft answer.

"No," she replied. "I am busy with my studies."

"Her studies were interrupted in Baghdad," explained Mr. Hafiz. "She is eager to make it up here in Canada."

"That's understandable," said Gran.

“No, while we are here, we enjoy the Canadian cuisine,” said Mr. Hafiz as Boneh returned with a tray full of glasses of ginger ale. “Hamburgers, hotdogs, French fries.” He smiled at Boneh as he took a glass. “But to come here and find this meal is like a blessing from Allah. It is like being home.”

“Home is not so good now,” said Gran’s pharmacist.

“True, true,” nodded Mr. Hafiz. He turned his attention to his plate.

Boneh wanted to ask questions about life in Baghdad, but he didn’t want to give it away that his father was also in Iraq. He decided it would be safer to talk about Canada.

“What’s your favourite subject at school?” he asked Leila.

“Drama,” said Leila after glancing at her father first, as if to make sure it was OK to speak to Boneh.

“Leila is also very intelligent in Biology,” said Gran’s pharmacist. It sounded like he was hoping for a medical career for Leila.

“I also like English Composition,” said Leila.

“It is a good thing,” said her father. “But it is not useful. What can you do? Write a blog?”

Boneh smiled. He had always wondered the same thing about English Composition. But Leila didn’t look convinced.

“I want to write a book,” she said, to no one in particular.

“Leila is also good in Chemistry,” said Gran’s pharmacist, not willing to give up on a more scientific career for his niece.

“If Leila works hard, she can be anything she wants,” said Gran diplomatically.

“Yes, this is the way of Canada, is it not?” said Mr. Hafiz.

There was agreement all around.

Then the topic turned to the more general discussion of movies. After discussing some of the current releases from Hollywood, Boneh was again surprised that Gran was familiar with Arabic movies as well.

Gran’s pharmacist joined in the discussion although Boneh noticed that Leila’s interest in movies had stopped with the topic of North American releases. He tried to catch her eye and smile. He liked North American movies, after all. But she seemed distant. She didn’t seem to want to connect with him.

Maybe the girl in the hijab was not interested in him. Boneh gave that some thought. Maybe there would be no romance

behind her father's back – a romance he half-anticipated, half-feared.

Indeed, if there was to be any romance, it appeared that it would be between Gran and Mr. Hafiz who were now animatedly discussing the films of Omar Sharif. Even Gran's pharmacist didn't seem to know as much about the topic as his brother and Gran.

"Omar Sharif was born a Catholic Christian. He became a Muslim to marry his wife. This I do not agree with," said Mr. Hafiz. "Now he speaks as a man of very little faith. To change one's religion for love is dangerous to one's faith."

"I agree," said Gran. "Faith is a serious issue."

"Are you a Christian, dear lady?" Mr. Hafiz asked.

Gran nodded.

"I am," she said.

"Leila's mother was a Christian," said Mr. Hafiz, glancing at his daughter. "I did not ask her to change her faith, nor did I change mine. We lived in a time when what religion you were did not matter in Iraq. Now the Sunnis and the Shias fight one another and life is intolerable for us all. Especially the Christians."

Gran nodded. Her eyes were full of sympathy and understanding.

"Leila is a Muslim," said Mr. Hafiz. Again, he glanced at his daughter who looked down at her plate.

Boneh thought it was an interesting assertion. And it certainly explained the hijab.

The conversation turned lighter. This time it was the cats. They had all been upstairs napping on Gran's bed, but the smell of food and their own natural curiosity brought them downstairs to sniff both the plates and the socks of the visitors.

They were well-received.

"I have never seen such beautiful creatures!" said Mr. Hafiz, putting his plate on the coffee table to pick up Cookie and stroke her caramel brown fur. While Cookie purred, Honey took advantage of the opportunity to sniff the falafels on Mr. Hafiz's plate.

The girl in the hijab also liked cats.

Before Honey could swipe one of the falafels, she had scooped him up and was cuddling him. Honey couldn't resist the attention and temporarily forgot about food.

Only Gran's pharmacist didn't seem inclined to hold a cat, but he did declare them "amusing."

Discussing the history and pedigree of Gran's cats took up the rest of dinner. Then it was time for dessert. Boneh left the living room to go make the mint tea and cardamom coffee. It was already 10:30, but no one seemed to mind it being so late. They were still talking about the cats when Boneh returned to the living room with the hot drinks and the almond cookies.

After the dessert, the evening came to a quick end. Mr. Hafiz thanked Boneh in English and then turned to Gran to thank her in Arabic. His Arabic was effusive and Gran seemed to enjoy every word of it. Leila smiled her thanks and Gran's pharmacist also added his thanks when Mr. Hafiz was done praising the evening.

"They left kind of suddenly," said Boneh when the door was closed and their guests were pulling out of the driveway.

"That's pretty consistent with Arab culture," Gran assured him, as they returned to the living room. "Right after the coffee, the evening usually ends."

"It's just as well," said Boneh, yawning. "I'm kind of tired."

"You worked hard, dear," said Gran. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Why don't you let me clean up?"

"Thanks, Gran!" He didn't want to admit it, but the day in the kitchen had worn him out.

As he went upstairs, he heard Gran whistling in the kitchen. It had obviously been a good evening for her.



## Chapter Twelve

Gran slept later than usual and Boneh awoke to a quiet, clean house and a bowl of cornflakes for breakfast.

The day felt anti-climactic after last night's success. Boneh felt restless after he put his bowl in the sink. The cats wanted to be fed too, so he took care of that and went into the living room. Then he decided he'd feed the outdoor cats too.

Uncle Cawley's newspapers were just sitting on the stoop. He brought them inside, opened up the largest one and started reading the front section. Maybe there would be something about Iraq.

Gran came downstairs, still looking cheerful. She went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, calling back her thanks to Boneh for feeding the cats.

"No problem, Gran," he called back. The front doorbell rang. "I'll get it," he called out again.

Expecting a package delivery man or maybe a church friend of Gran's, he was amazed to see Mr. Hafiz.

"Good afternoon, Boneh!" said Mr. Hafiz, beaming.

Afternoon? Was it afternoon already? It was. As he welcomed Mr. Hafiz into the house he snuck a peak at the clock in the living room and saw it was 12:10.

Gran came down the hallway from the kitchen, just as startled as Boneh. But Mr. Hafiz showed no surprise at seeing Gran in her purple robe.

*And why should he?* Boneh thought. It looked a lot like what she had on last night.

“Dear lady!” said Mr. Hafiz. “Pardon this intrusion. But I just had to thank you once again for the lovely evening and to bring you this small token of my appreciation.” He held out a paper bag.

“Oh, Mr. Hafiz! How kind!” Gran had recovered and seemed perfectly fine with receiving Mr. Hafiz in her bathrobe. She opened the bag and pulled out a plant.

“It is catnip,” explained Mr. Hafiz.

“The cats will love it!” said Gran with delight. Honey was already circling her legs, sniffing. Carefully, Gran put the plant down on the floor against the wall. Slowly, the other cats made their way over to inspect this new interest. “Would you care for a cup of coffee?” she asked, turning back to Mr. Hafiz.

“I would not want to impose on you,” said Mr. Hafiz.

“I was just sitting down to one myself,” said Gran.

“Then I will most happily join you,” said Mr. Hafiz. The two went down the hallway to the kitchen. Boneh watched their backs. This was definitely a strange turn of events.

Even the cats were ignoring him, already chewing on the leaves of the new plant.

Boneh returned to Uncle Cawley’s chair and the newspapers.

Mr. Hafiz only stayed for twenty minutes. Gran explained after he was gone, that he was on his lunch break and Leila was behind the counter for him.

Gran, upon finding out that this was his lunch, had fed him some leftovers from last night and once again, Mr. Hafiz had thanked Boneh profusely on his way out.

On her way back upstairs, Gran casually mentioned that Mr. Hafiz would be coming back again tonight for popcorn and an Omar Sharif movie.

Boneh’s jaw dropped.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said Gran, still on the stairs. “I’ll take care of the popcorn and drinks. You can just relax and have a good evening.”

A good evening watching a movie in Arabic?

Boneh couldn’t believe how rapidly his world was changing. What would Uncle Cawley have to say about this?

He had a chance to share his thoughts with Uncle Cawley the next day.

There was another email from him and this time, he said that Boneh could reply to it since he would stay for a while. From the email address, he seemed to be at a church.

Boneh composed a reply right away. He told him how Gran and Mr. Hafiz had spent the evening on the couch sipping grape pop and watching some old movie set in Cairo. Boneh hadn’t understood a word of it. Gran seemed to follow most of it, although she occasionally asked Mr. Hafiz what something meant and he was happy to explain.

True to her word, Gran had taken care of all the food. She even had tea and cookies, although the cookies had been a result of a last-minute trip to the grocery store. Mr. Hafiz had not come empty-handed. He had brought some stuffed dates that he said were greatly enjoyed back in Baghdad. Boneh tried several and agreed with him. But that was about it for his conversation with Mr. Hafiz because the night was almost entirely in Arabic.

Reading his message over, Boneh could see that it wasn’t exactly a crisis situation. But he thought Uncle Cawley would understand how unsettling it all was.

Boneh’s mouse hovered over the send icon. And then he changed his mind and started over.

Life here was fine. Everything was fine. Gran was fine.

Boneh sat back and thought about it.

The cats were fine, he added.

“I miss you,” he concluded. And he really meant it.

He had to give Gran credit.

The addition of Mr. Hafiz in her life didn’t alter her in any way. All it had done was bring out aspects of her that Boneh hadn’t been aware of. She dressed the same, talked the same and behaved the same with him. But now he had the sense that Gran

was a person, a real person. He had always just thought of her as his Gran.

Tonight, Gran was out with Mr. Hafiz, enjoying a summer walk in nearby Centennial Park. She returned home close to midnight to report that they had talked while watching some late-night soccer games in the well-lit park.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said, sitting down on the couch. He had been watching one of Uncle Cawley's videos on the TV – a Cary Grant comedy. Not that he was into Cary Grant, it was just that Uncle Cawley's collection was somewhat limited. "I should have invited you and Leila along. That was what this was all about in the first place, wasn't it?"

"That's OK," said Boneh, feeling almost listless. "I don't think much is gonna happen in that direction. But, like, are you and Mr. Hafiz seeing each other?"

"Boneh!" said Gran looking both amused and surprised. "I'm not a . . . a . . . a cougar!"

Boneh grinned.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I just wondered."

"I think Mr. Hafiz needs a friend," said Gran. "He's a long way from home. He misses Baghdad and his Arab world. We can talk and he needs that now."

"Yeah, I guess you're a bit old for him, anyhow," said Boneh.

"Actually," said Gran, visibly straightening up. "My age shouldn't be an issue in the Islamic culture. The prophet Muhammad was twenty-five when he married his first wife, Khadijah, who was forty at the time. It's a known fact that an older woman can bring a lot into a relationship . . ."

"Gran!" said Boneh, grinning.

"Sorry, dear," said Gran, standing up and leaning over to kiss him on the cheek. "Well, I'm off to bed. Sleep well."

Boneh nodded. His eyes went back to the TV. He wasn't really following the movie. It would have been nice if Uncle Cawley had been here to share it with him.

Sunday was the only day the pharmacy was closed.

Gran invited Mr. Hafiz and Leila over for brunch.

"I can do the cooking, dear," she said to Boneh.

"No, that's OK," said Boneh. "I like to cook."

They were scheduled to come at eleven and he used the morning to bake some blueberry muffins, grate some potatoes for hash browns and shred some cheese for omelets.

The thought of the girl in the hijab coming to his house was no longer exciting, but he did want to make a good impression with his cuisine.

At ten to eleven, he switched on the coffeemaker and put the hash browns in the frying pan.

At eleven, Gran was answering the doorbell. Today she was wearing a red sweater, black slacks and some gold bangles. She looked like herself, but Boneh thought he detected a touch of lipstick. Gran rarely bothered with makeup. Maybe it was just coloured lip gloss.

"Ah, it is nice and cool in here," Boneh heard Mr. Hafiz say as he came in. "It is already becoming a warm day outside."

"It must be quite hot in Baghdad these days," said Gran.

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Hafiz. "It can go as high as one hundred and twenty degrees in the summer."

*Poor Uncle Cawley*, thought Boneh, cracking some eggs into a bowl.

He could hear light conversation going on in the living room although Leila didn't seem to be contributing anything. Maybe she hadn't even come.

But she had come, he found out, when the food was ready and they were all seated at the kitchen table. She hardly looked at him.

It was Gran who got her talking, asking her about her job at the pharmacy. Yes, she liked it very much. It was good to have a summer job. If she had been in Baghdad, she would not have had a summer job.

"It is best these days for the women there to stay home," said Mr. Hafiz. "It was not always like that, though."

There were a few moments of silence and Gran turned the discussion to some of the current events she had read in the morning paper.

Between Boneh and Gran, Uncle Cawley's newspapers were getting read.

Mr. Hafiz had an opinion on every topic Gran brought up – genetically modified foods from the United States, rising hydro prices in Ontario and a possible war between Iran and Israel. The

last topic sparked a conversation that lasted well past the meal and continued on into the living room. Mr. Hafiz had two brothers, the pharmacist who was older than him and a younger brother who had died in the Iraqi war with Iran.

Boneh was barely aware that there had been a war between Iraq and Iran. Over coffee in the living room, he found out that it had lasted for most of the 80's and that the United States had backed Saddam Hussein with arms to fight the Iranians. That was ironic. Hadn't they gone to Iraq to get rid of Saddam? After an hour of listening to Mr. Hafiz, Boneh had no idea why his father was in Iraq. Uncle Cawley's mission made way more sense. Between the war with Iran and the recent American occupation, Mr. Hafiz made it clear that Iraq had suffered more injustice than most countries.

"It's all about oil," said Gran, shaking her head. "We have it out West, but it has to be extracted from the tar sands and no one would go to war over it."

"Consider yourself blessed," said Mr. Hafiz.

Leila had little interest in the conversation. The comics leftover from the Saturday paper were on the coffee table and she was reading them. A couple of weeks ago, Boneh would have been making an effort to connect with her. "I like comics," he could picture himself saying. But today, he was finding Mr. Hafiz's talk on the situation in Iraq too interesting to try to meet her eye.

"I think I'll go to the library and check out some books on Iraq," said Boneh.

Mr. Hafiz nodded his approval and Gran said, "That's an excellent idea." She turned to Mr. Hafiz and said, "Our library is pretty good about keeping up with current books. Have you had a chance to visit it yet?"

"Alas, I have not," said Mr. Hafiz. "It is closed on Sundays and we are working every other day."

"What would your brother do without you?" said Gran, smiling.

"He may have to do without us," said Mr. Hafiz gravely.

"Why is that?" said Gran. "If it's not rude of me to ask."

"I am afraid that Leila and I will be going back to Baghdad."

## Chapter Thirteen

O h dear,” said Gran. “Is it anything to do with your papers? They’re not letting you stay . . .?”

“Nothing like that,” said Mr. Hafiz, waving a hand. He glanced at his daughter who was now reading another section of the newspaper. “We have responsibilities . . .”

There was a moment of silence. Leila’s eyes remained on the newspaper.

“It is a family matter, but I would like to share it with you,” said Mr. Hafiz.

Gran nodded.

“I am honoured.”

“It has much to do with Leila’s mother, as well as my own brother,” said Mr. Hafiz. “You see, my younger brother, the one who died in Iran, was married to my wife’s older sister.”

Gran nodded, looking perfectly familiar with these kinds of family ties.

“Since my brother died, I have tried to also care for his family. And, of course, Leila’s mother was so close to her sister.”

Gran nodded again. She was a sympathetic listener.

“Often, Leila’s mother would care for her sister’s children. Her sister had a job as a teacher. But then, the situation changed so much in Baghdad that it became almost impossible for a woman to work outside the home, or even to move freely in the streets without a man to accompany her.”

“So the entire financial load of caring for your brother’s family fell to you,” said Gran.

Mr. Hafiz nodded.

“Yes, and then my dear wife died and the situation became intolerable for me.”

Mr. Hafiz was only looking at Gran and Gran’s eyes were full of compassion. Boneh could understand why a man might like telling her his troubles.

“Dad married her,” Leila spoke up. She wasn’t looking at anyone, only the paper.

Mr. Hafiz nodded.

“It is true. There was nothing else for me to do.”

“I can see that,” said Gran slowly. “She would be a lot like your first wife, wouldn’t she?”

Mr. Hafiz looked grateful at her understanding of the situation.

“Yes, very much like my first wife. Then we decided that since Baghdad had changed so much, we would join my brother here in Canada.”

“But your wife’s not here,” said Gran.

Mr. Hafiz nodded.

“She would have been able to come. But her children are grown now. Two boys now in their twenties, one married, one still at home. One daughter, nineteen, not married. They could not come. Only Leila and I and her were able to get the proper permits.”

“But she didn’t want to leave her children,” said Gran, again, with sympathetic understanding.

“Yes,” said Mr. Hafiz, sounding sad, exhaling heavily. “I did everything I could here. I have met with immigration people here and they all say the same thing. My wife can come, but not her grown children. Her grown children will all have to apply separately.”

“And your wife will not leave Baghdad until they can,” concluded Gran.

Mr. Hafiz nodded.

"So I will go back in September. I cannot leave her alone there."

"I can understand that," said Gran.

"So you won't be going back to school here?" said Boneh turning to Leila.

Leila just shook her head, her eyes on the newspaper. Boneh didn't think she was reading it anymore. All of Boneh's fears that Mr. Hafiz might marry Gran and Leila would become his aunt had evaporated. Now he just felt sorry for her. It didn't sound as though she wanted to go back, but it also didn't sound as if she had any say in it.

"Baghdad is my home," said Leila.

She said it with assurance. Boneh thought about how she always ate alone in the cafeteria. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Boneh was washing dishes and Gran was drying and putting them away.

"I'm sorry, Gran," said Boneh suddenly. They had been enjoying a comfortable silence.

"For what, dear?" asked Gran, looking surprised.

"Oh, you know. About Mr. Hafiz being married and all."

"Oh that!" said Gran laughing. "I don't mind. I'm kind of relieved."

Boneh saw a sparkle in her eye.

"The Bible says you can serve the Master better if you're not married," continued Gran.

"Yeah, I guess that's true," said Boneh, also grinning. He was kind of relieved too that the girl in the hijab wasn't coming back to school. It wasn't that he didn't like her. In fact, he still kind of did. But after all they'd been through this summer, they'd probably end up talking and getting to know each other better and then he'd *really* start liking her. And that would make things majorly complicated.

"Would you like to come out with me and Mr. Hafiz tomorrow night?" Gran asked.

"*What?*" said Boneh. He was up to his elbows in sudsy dishwater but he still turned to look at her.

"We're still friends!" said Gran. "And he wants to go out for ice cream. With Leila. You could come too."

"OK," said Boneh, mostly because he liked ice cream. He didn't anticipate that Leila would have a lot to say to him.

But the next night, he found he was wrong.

As they were strolling through Centennial Park with their ice cream cones, Leila turned out to be very talkative. Gran and Mr. Hafiz were walking ahead, speaking in Arabic. It was a balmy summer evening and all of the soccer fields were lit and in use, as were several of the softball fields.

"The American soldiers play baseball," said Leila, nodding toward one of the softball fields. "But we play soccer. All the boys play soccer in the streets. My cousin is a soccer player. He plays for Iraq."

"Are you close to your cousin?" asked Boneh. It was the only thing he could think of asking. He didn't play soccer or baseball himself.

Leila nodded.

"He is my aunt's son. One of the children that she does not want to leave behind."

"Are you sorry you have to go back?" It was a bold question, but he didn't know what else to say.

Leila shook her head and then shrugged.

"A little bit. It is cooler here."

Today it had gone up to 93 degrees Celsius. Boneh couldn't imagine a hotter day.

"I will miss reading," said Leila.

"Yeah, I saw you taking out Hamlet in the library." Then he was embarrassed by the admission. To hide it, he said quickly. "For a class, I guess."

"No, I like to read for enjoyment. I didn't have a chance to take any classes in Shakespeare."

*Shakespeare for enjoyment?* This was a new idea to Boneh.

"I will miss school," continued Leila. "I hope I can continue to go to school in Baghdad. My aunt is trying to get me a position in a high school for girls. She is teaching there now. One of my cousins has to go with her every day. We live on Haifa Street and there has been much fighting between the Americans and the militias. My cousin stays at home and watches TV all day.

I hope I don't have to just sit at home with her. I am going to bring a suitcase of books back with me."

Boneh nodded.

"My cousin is depressed all the time," continued Leila. "She doesn't tell my aunt, but she tells me. She wrote to me. She has no life and no boyfriend and she can only go shopping when her brother goes with her. She has to wear the hijab and the abaya whenever she goes out. Some of her friends even wear burkas to protect themselves. My cousin refuses to but my aunt is always worried she will be kidnapped and then no man will want her if she comes back alive . . ."

Leila's words were coming like a flood.

"The only people she can talk to are the people in the building because the phone lines are always going out. And my aunt will not let her leave the apartment so she has to do it in secret. When I go back, if I am stuck with her all day and she sneaks out and gets caught, it will be me who gets into trouble for not telling my father."

Her father was too far ahead and too involved in his animated conversation with Gran to hear.

"What does your father do in Baghdad?" asked Boneh.

"He was a pharmacist, too. Like his brother," said Leila, listlessly. Her mind was on her own plight. "But the Americans dropped one of their bombs on his pharmacy."

"That's too bad," said Boneh, with sincerity, even if it was ineffectual.

"All the talk is boring in Baghdad," said Leila. "It is even boring here. All Father and Uncle talk about is Baghdad. The only reason they have the internet is to go online and see which streets there is fighting on. All they talk about is the occupation. It is only with your grandmother that I see my father like he was, when my mother was alive." Leila looked ahead at her dad who was laughing and waving his arms, his ice cream thankfully long-finished. "Now he is talking about *things*, other things."

"Well, that's good," said Boneh, who couldn't think of anything else to say.

"It is," agreed Leila.

They walked in silence, finishing their ice cream.

"Can I write to you when you're in Baghdad?" asked Boneh.

“No,” said Leila abruptly. “If I go back to Baghdad, I do not want to remember that I was here.”

## Chapter Fourteen

It could have been a conversation killer, but Leila's abrupt answer didn't bring their exchange to an end. They continued to talk, first about movies, then classes at school, and then at length about books. Leila was saving all the money her uncle paid her for working in the pharmacy to buy books. Like her dad's pharmacy, the library closest to Leila's apartment in Baghdad was another casualty of war.

Boneh thought about the library that he rarely went to and decided that he should go visit more often.

They walked back to Boneh and Gran's where Mr. Hafiz's car was parked. It was actually Gran's pharmacist's car, Boneh had found out. Leila remembered a day when her family had had a car in Baghdad, but at some point it had been stolen and never recovered.

Despite the late hour, Gran and Mr. Hafiz sat down on the plastic chairs on the porch. Sugar, Cream, Peaches, Maple, Olive, and Mouse – the outdoor cats – came over to see if Gran had brought them anything to eat.

"Will you bring us some lemonade, Boneh?" said Gran. "And perhaps some dry food for the cats?"

“Sure, Gran,” said Boneh. He noticed that Leila stayed outside with her father.

He returned a few minutes later with a jug of lemonade and some glasses, as well as a plate of chocolate chip oatmeal cookies he had made that day.

He went back in to fill an empty margarine container full of cat food.

The cats provided a form of entertainment while they sipped their lemonade and ate the cookies.

Boneh had never watched the outdoor cats eat before, but it was kind of interesting. They jostled each other around the bowl. Sugar was the dominant one who liked to have his face right in the entire bowl. Peaches was small but bold. He managed to nuzzle his face right in too. Cream held back, not wanting to get too close to the people. He kept eyeing Gran, of all people, with suspicion, as if she might be trying to lure him in for purposes of capture. Mouse, who had been given the name because she was so good at capturing her own food, yawned and watched her kin. She wasn’t particularly hungry. Olive moved in now and then to take some food and retreat back. Maple, almost as big as Sugar, decided that Sugar had had enough and forcibly got his face in the bowl. Sugar looked miffed and for a moment it appeared there would be a cat fight. But then Sugar ambled off into the darkness.

“Sugar’s big, but he’s not much of a fighter,” said Gran, smiling.

Mr. Hafiz nodded.

“Dear lady,” he said. “I have to tell you, I will remember these days for the rest of my life.”

Boneh smiled to himself.

Maybe Leila’s father wouldn’t let her forget her days here in Canada.

After a day at the library and a few days reading more about Iraq, Boneh headed to his computer to email Uncle Cawley. He had a lot on his mind.

The book that was most disturbing was the one that talked about recent ops that had gone wrong in Iraq. One had gone wrong because of misinformation and innocent civilians had gotten killed. Another had gone wrong because the militias had

been tipped off and were waiting when the soldiers arrived. Another failed when their tank encountered a landmine. The list went on. It left Boneh worried about his father, Uncle Cawley . . . and Leila and her father who would be back in Iraq in a couple of months.

He told Uncle Cawley he'd been doing some reading and knew it was an unstable region. He knew he sounded more like a journalist than a nephew when he used phrases like "unstable region," but it wasn't easy putting his thoughts into words.

What he really wanted to say was, "Uncle Cawley, I'm scared. Uncle Cawley, come home!" What he actually wrote was a little more rambling.

But Uncle Cawley must have been able to read between the lines because the next morning, there was a reply with some scriptures about faith and trusting in God.

"I feel protected here, Boneh, in a way I can't explain. Faith becomes alive in situations like this. I'll tell you more when I get home. I look forward to coming home, but right now, I know I'm in the right place."

He and Uncle Cawley hadn't talked much about spiritual matters, so this was different for both of them. Boneh leaned back. *In the right place*. Was it possible, Boneh was also in the right place? Uncle Cawley felt it because he was in a dangerous situation. Was it possible to feel like one was in the right place when there seemed to be no danger whatsoever?

Boneh went downstairs to find Gran cleaning kitty litter. No glamour there. But Gran didn't seem to mind.

"What are you up to today, Boneh?" Gran asked, straightening up and heading into the bathroom to wash her hands.

"Nothing much," said Boneh. "Need any help with anything?"

"The backyard could stand to be mowed."

Boneh nodded.

The backyard was mostly given over to the outdoor cats, but every now and then, Uncle Cawley would mow it.

He went outside to the back shed and hauled out the antiquated lawnmower. He had seen Uncle Cawley do it but had never done it himself. It took a few minutes to realize it needed some gas and the better part of the morning to actually get the job done. After that, Gran surprised him by suggesting they go out for lunch.

They got in the car and Gran drove out of their residential neighbourhood to one that had retail shops and restaurants. She pulled into the parking lot of an upscale eatery.

"What's the occasion, Gran?" asked Boneh, when they were seated and both looking through a six-page menu. The only other people in the restaurant were business people on their lunch.

"I thought we could throw a little going-away party for Mr. Hafiz and Leila," said Gran, her eyes skimming the menu. "I wanted to check out some of the local places and see which one would be best."

"That's a great idea," said Boneh, putting his menu down. He had already decided he was going to have the house burger with fries. "But why don't you let me make the food and we'll have it at home?"

"I would love that," said Gran, putting down her menu. "But it would be a lot of work, dear. I was going to talk to my pharmacist and suggest he invite everyone who met Mr. Hafiz and Leila while they were here."

"I'd like to do it," said Boneh. "I know how to make all the Arabic dishes and I could have some other stuff too."

"I know you'd do an excellent job," said Gran. "OK, let's do it!"

The waitress arrived at their table with two glasses of ice water and Gran went ahead and ordered a chicken salad, despite that their reason for coming was now void.

"We have plenty of time to plan," said Gran, while they waited for their food to come. "Normally I don't bother with doing things this far ahead, but something in me wanted to make sure they had some good memories of Canada."

"I know what you mean," said Boneh. "Leila says she just wants to forget Canada, but I think it's a good thing to remember."

Gran nodded.

"She says that because she's going back to a completely different world. But the truth is, people are people wherever you go. People can show a lot of nobility in stressful situations and a lot of cowardice in peaceful times. I don't think our worlds are that different when it comes to human nature."

"I think I know what you mean," said Boneh. "Leila's going home to Baghdad where life is tough. When she was here, it wasn't so tough, but she didn't have anyone to sit with at lunch."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Gran, nodding her thanks to the waitress who had put a salad down in front of her.

While they ate, they talked about the books Boneh had been reading.

Gran was smiling.

"It's a lot like the books I read when I was working in the business," she said. "I remember how everything changed when the Shah had to leave Iran and the Ayatollah came in . . ."

"The who?" said Boneh.

Gran told him about the Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as about a hostage crisis in Tehran when students in support of the revolution had taken over the American embassy and held its inhabitants for over a year before the U.S. could come to an agreement with the Iranians.

Boneh almost forgot about his hamburger as Gran told him about how the Americans had made an attempt to rescue their personnel, only to have it end in failure.

"It was in 1980 that they were released," Gran said, her fork toying with a piece of chicken. "Right after that was the war that Mr. Hafiz was talking about."

"The one between Iraq and Iran?" said Boneh.

Gran nodded.

"So that's why the U.S. decided to support Saddam Hussein in Iraq?"

"Yes, it made sense at the time," said Gran. "But there was a scandal in the eighties when it came out that the Americans were supplying arms to Iran, despite a world embargo, in the hope that Iran would then release six other American hostages that they'd taken. The money used from the sale of weapons to Iran was then used to fund guerilla activities in Nicaragua. The group they were supporting was called the Nicaraguan Contras, so the whole scandal became known as the Iran-Contra Affair."

"Wow!" said Boneh. "I have so much reading to do!"

Gran nodded.

"It's a very interesting part of the world, to say the least." A cloud of concern passed over her face. "I just hope your Uncle Cawley comes back safely."

“He will,” said Boneh, trying to speak with assurance. He told her about the email he had received that morning.

Gran nodded.

“Good,” she said. “Then we won’t worry about him. He has his friends there to think of. We’ll just worry about this party that we’re going to throw for our friends here.”

When they got back, Gran made a call to her pharmacist to let him know about the idea of the party.

“He likes the idea,” she reported when she got off the phone. “He says it would be best if we have it the end of August. They’ll be leaving the first Saturday in September.”

“OK,” said Boneh. He had a piece of paper on which he had scribbled all the things he planned to make for the event. “How many people can we expect?”

“He said he’ll talk to some of the people at the mosque. Mr. Hafiz goes regularly and has a number of acquaintances there.”

Gran got the leash off the bookshelf and went looking for Pudding, whose turn it was to go for a walk.

Boneh was left pondering the irony of Uncle Cawley sneaking Bibles past Muslims to distribute to Christians while he and Gran were hosting a party for Mr. Hafiz and his fellow Muslims from the mosque.

## Chapter Fifteen

While the surprise party was being planned, Gran continued to get together with Mr. Hafiz. Leila didn't join them. Gran reported to Boneh that she preferred to stay home and read library books checked out on her uncle's card.

So Boneh didn't join them either. But when they were out on the front porch, talking and drinking lemonade into the night, Boneh would listen in. His bedroom overlooked the backyard, but Uncle Cawley's was in the front. So Boneh would sneak into his uncle's room and raise the window enough to hear the conversation down below.

Gran was the perfect partner for Mr. Hafiz – both a sympathetic and intelligent listener.

She asked the sort of questions that made a man open up. So Boneh learned a lot about life in Baghdad.

Despite intense pressure, life went on. Merchants continued to sell their wares and people continued to get out of the house even with the dangers. Women were only safe if they dressed in the loose robes advised by the Quran.

It was discussed between Gran and Mr. Hafiz that Leila had been allowed to dress in Western-style clothing while in Canada, as long as she continued to wear the hijab.

Gran murmured sympathetically about the difficulties of raising a daughter in any country and offered some thoughts on the topic.

Boneh, listening in, realized that Gran had also raised his mother.

"A girl needs to feel good about herself," said Gran.

Even Mr. Hafiz would miss the freedom of fashion in Canada. He would have to give up the pair of jeans he had purchased here.

"They are too Western in Baghdad," he explained.

But what Mr. Hafiz would miss the most about Canada was how you could pull into a filling station, pump your tank full of gas and be out of there in under five minutes.

"In Baghdad, I once waited eleven hours in line to fill up my tank with gas," he said.

Gran nodded sympathetically.

Without being too forward, Gran found out that Mr. Hafiz did not expect to find work when he returned to Baghdad. His wife had a good job but his whole life would be dedicated to making sure she got to it safely.

"It is like this," said Mr. Hafiz. "Every neighbourhood has its own men to guard it and no one wants outsiders to pass through. It is safer that way."

Gran nodded.

"So to get to another neighbourhood, one must move through the more crowded areas, but those crowded areas can also be war zones."

"Are you safe when you're at home?" Gran asked.

"No," said Mr. Hafiz. "Your neighbours are your worst enemies. If they do not like you, or if you do something unusual, they will call the authorities, or even worse, the militia. For instance, Leila and I will tell no one we have been to Canada. They will think we are in favour of the Americans, maybe even working for them. We must bring back nothing to make people think we have come to the West. We will tell everyone we were in Jordan."

"I can understand that," said Gran.

Boneh, listening from above, could also understand now why Leila would say she would forget ever being in Canada.

Gran also shared a lot of her own memories with Mr. Hafiz.

She and her husband had been complete opposites in every way. Gran had some comical anecdotes about how they had argued on every topic ranging from how Gran should wear her hair to what kind of tiles to put in the bathroom.

“Marriage,” said Mr. Hafiz, shaking his head. “It is a strange invention and yet we continue to do it.”

Gran nodded.

“My brother and I aren’t always on the same wavelength, but at least we agree to disagree. With my husband, it was more of a titanic struggle. Most of the time we were in a state of negotiation. He agreed that I could colour my hair if he could have the kind of tiles he wanted.”

“It is the way of all forces of equal strength,” said Mr. Hafiz, smiling.

Some nights, they would watch a movie in the living room and Boneh would join them. His contribution was to make the popcorn. He had a couple of recipes from the teen cookbook. One night, he made them caramel popcorn, another night, cheese popcorn. And then he went online and found all sorts of exotic ideas. Mr. Hafiz’s favourite was Cajun-spiced.

The plans for the party were coming along. They had set a date, the last Saturday night in August – which was a week before the Hafizes left. Gran’s pharmacist had at least twenty people from the mosque who wanted to come.

When Boneh wasn’t reading about the Middle East, he was experimenting with food.

His birthday came on August 2<sup>nd</sup> and Gran surprised him with a waffle-maker for a present.

“I love it! Thank you!” he said, kissing her cheek.

Breakfasts from that point on were waffles – waffles with blueberries, waffles with apples and cinnamon, waffles with real Canadian maple syrup, waffles with pumpkin pie seasoning, and Gran’s favourite, waffles with strawberries and whip cream. Mr. Hafiz even got to try a dessert waffle – a brownie waffle topped with vanilla ice cream.

The next time Uncle Cawley emailed, Boneh told him about the waffle-maker. Uncle Cawley replied that he couldn’t wait to

try some of Boneh's new creations and he expected to be home soon. In fact, he had been planning to make his way back to Baghdad to book a flight home when the church he was staying in had been hit by a bomb. The critical part was that they had a small medical clinic for anyone in need. It had suffered the most damage. As soon as it was up-and-running again, Uncle Cawley would return home.

"What sort of books does Leila like to read?" Boneh asked Mr. Hafiz one night while they were waiting for Gran to bring some ginger ale. Mr. Hafiz had brought over an Arabic comedy for him and Gran to watch.

"Oh, she reads everything," said Mr. Hafiz, vaguely.

"Would it be OK if I gave her some books as a present?" asked Boneh. "You know, a going-away present?"

"That would be fine," said Mr. Hafiz, after a moment of hesitation.

"I won't give her anything too Canadian," said Boneh quickly, recalling how Mr. Hafiz didn't want to bring back anything that was obviously North American. Besides, Boneh already had something in mind if Mr. Hafiz couldn't provide further insight.

"Yes, we must be careful," said Mr. Hafiz, now distracted by Gran returning with a tray of glasses.

With less than a week to go before the big party, Boneh's mind was entirely on food preparations. Leila's present – ordered online – was now wrapped in some paper Gran had found in her closet, sitting on his desk.

The number of people coming to the party had jumped from twenty to thirty. Gran was doing her bit to prepare for it by cleaning the downstairs bathroom and vacuuming all the cat hairs from the furniture. She had gone to the library and checked out a bunch of easy-listening music CDs to play in the background. A "Farewell to our Friends" cake had been ordered from the grocery store's bakery. Gran seemed knowledgeable about organizing parties.

Despite the preparations, she was able to visit with Mr. Hafiz and not let on that there was a party in the works. They would sit on the porch and talk while Boneh listened in above. He preferred it that way. If he sat down with them, they'd be obliged to include him. This way, they could talk as two adults and Boneh

could enjoy hearing Gran tell Mr. Hafiz about her experiences in the oil industry.

Mr. Hafiz's opinion was that Iraq would be better off without oil.

"The West would not be interested in us then," he said. "Then we would just have our history and our dignity."

Gran agreed.

"I was reading an article in the paper today about tourism in Iraq. Apparently, it's gotten safe enough there that some adventurous people are taking tours to all the significant sites."

Even in the dim light, Boneh could see a wry smile on Mr. Hafiz's face.

"Maybe I can get a job showing tourists around, eh?"

Then the big night arrived.

Gran's pharmacist was bringing Leila and Mr. Hafiz over once the pharmacy closed at nine.

Guests, however, were invited to arrive anytime between eight and nine.

By eight-thirty, people were milling around in the living room, nibbling on pita and baba ghanoush and hummus and tabbouleh.

Gran, in her abaya, was circulating with a tray of iced drinks, talking and laughing and doing a great job of acting like it was perfectly normal to have thirty Arabs in her living room.

Boneh was too busy in the kitchen, checking his lamb in the oven and working on a rice pilaf, to think too much about it at first. When Boneh came out to start putting the hot food on the dining room table, he discovered that most of the people in the living room were men, although there were a few wives and even a couple of small children. The small children liked the cats and were in a corner rolling a ball around for them to pounce on.

It was a surreal scene. Their house had never hosted an event on this scale. In fact, with the music and the talking, they almost didn't notice when Gran's pharmacist came in. But then a few people turned, until all eyes were on the front door. When Mr. Hafiz and Leila came in, Boneh could see the surprise that turned to bewilderment and then to smiles when it was realized that the crowded party was for them. The ladies surrounded Leila and soon they were sitting on a couch together. The men were patting Mr. Hafiz on the back. Most of the talk was in English so Boneh heard many people telling him how much they'd miss him. Gran's

pharmacist joined Gran briefly so that they could agree that the surprise had been a complete success.

Boneh felt shy among so many people and was glad to be able to retreat to the kitchen. He had some dessert platters to arrange. The main thing was that Mr. Hafiz and Leila felt special tonight. He certainly wasn't the centre of things.

"Boneh!"

Boneh turned around.

It was Mr. Hafiz.

"I will most certainly miss your cooking!" said Mr. Hafiz. "I think your hummus is actually better than the hummus from the Rashid Street bakery."

Boneh grinned.

"I'm glad to hear it."

Mr. Hafiz gave him a big smile before heading back out into the living room.

Boneh figured he had just gotten the best compliment that Mr. Hafiz could pay his cooking.

The party had wrapped up shortly after the dessert and coffee. Now it was only Mr. Hafiz, Leila, Gran's pharmacist and Boneh.

Boneh still had his gift to give and while everyone moved out onto the porch to enjoy the late night air, he hurried upstairs to his room. He hoped she would like it.

Coming back downstairs to a house strewn with empty platters, coffee cups and dessert plates, Boneh couldn't believe that he and Gran had done it – an evening of authentic Arabic cuisine for thirty people!

He went out onto the porch. The adults were all seated, sipping coffee. Leila had moved to the other side of the porch and was just staring out at the quiet street.

"This is for you," said Boneh, handing it to her.

"For me?" Leila took it. Boneh knew her father was keeping a careful eye on the situation. He didn't mind. Gone were any thoughts that he and Leila might get together.

"Open it and see if you like it," said Boneh. Gran had warned him that sometimes Arabs wouldn't open a present right away, but Boneh wanted to be sure he had gotten the right thing.

Leila unwrapped the paper. The look on her face told him it was perfect.

“Oh Boneh!” she said. It was the first time she had used his name. “I love it!”

She took her new book, an extremely thick tome, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, to show to her father and uncle.

“Very nice,” said her father, looking it over.

Gran’s pharmacist nodded his approval.

“Is it OK?” Boneh asked. “I mean, for taking back.”

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Hafiz. “Shakespeare is fine. Some people say he was from Iraq.”

Gran and Boneh’s eyebrows went up.

“It is true,” said Mr. Hafiz, nodding and smiling. “Some people say his real home was Zubair, not England. His plays are performed often in Iraq.”

While Leila flipped through her new book and the adults talked about the party, Boneh was finally able to relax. That Shakespeare thing had worked out well. He was now content that the evening had been a success.

The pharmacy was closed the following Saturday.

It wasn’t Gran’s destination for the day, but she and Boneh were out purchasing some more kitty litter. Like the heavy bags of cat food, kitty litter needed a man along.

“There’s a sign on the door,” said Boneh, as they passed by.

Impulsively, Gran pulled into the small parking lot.

*Closed for family matters*, read the sign.

“He’s taken them to the airport,” said Gran.

Another sign in the window read, “Help wanted.”

“It makes me feel kind of sad,” said Boneh.

“I know what you mean,” said Gran, starting the engine again.



## Chapter Sixteen

I guess it's kind of like spy work," Uncle Cawley said. "A lot of the Christians have gone underground and you have to be James Bond just to visit with them. I had to disguise myself as an Arab so no harm would come to them for meeting with someone from the West."

"Wow," said Boneh. "That's kind of scary."

It was two weeks into the school year and one day, Boneh had come home to find his uncle sitting in his favourite chair, newspapers everywhere.

Now there was a lot of catching up to do.

"It is," agreed Uncle Cawley. "In fact, there's always this feeling of living on the edge. Every neighbourhood seems to have its own roadblocks that you have to pass through. Armed men guard them. It took me awhile to realize who were the soldiers and who were just the neighbourhood militias. Not that it really mattered in the end. They all had guns."

"Did you see a lot of Americans?"

"Riding around in a humvee or on a tank. Didn't actually talk to any of them. They don't stop for anyone. In fact, when they're in their Humvees, they cruise along and anyone who gets in their

way, gets a nudge in the rear fender until he gets out of their lane.”

“Wow, that’s not going to make friends,” said Boneh.

Uncle Cawley nodded.

“They’re not there to make friends anymore. They’re just there to stay alive and you don’t stay alive if you stop in traffic on the road. Then you become vulnerable.”

Boneh shook his head at this philosophy of driving.

“So, like, did you go to the Green Zone?” he asked.

Uncle Cawley shook his head.

“Nope. That’s one pretty protected neighbourhood. Most Christians are living in the nooks and crannies, so to speak.”

Uncle Cawley leaned forward.

“They’re very brave, though. They still get together for worship services. The church I stayed in was bombed twice in the last year and one of those times was when I was there.”

“What was it like?”

“It was like putting your faith entirely in God,” said Uncle Cawley slowly. “I felt a strong sense that I was being protected. I started to realize that faith works when you can’t see.” Uncle Cawley was staring at the wall as he tried to put his feelings into words. “It’s easy to feel safe in Canada. There aren’t bombs going off. But I started to realize how that’s not faith. That’s just adequate police protection and no war zone. When the situation all around you is hostile, then faith becomes everything. It becomes the *only* thing.”

Uncle Cawley leaned back.

“I think I understand,” said Boneh, nodding.

“Things will be quiet around here compared to Iraq. It’ll take me awhile to get used to it.” Uncle Cawley picked up his newspaper again.

“Oh, I dunno,” said Boneh grinning. “There’s always Gran.”

“Gran?” Uncle Cawley looked at Boneh over the top of his paper.

“Yeah,” said Boneh. “Gran’s pretty cool. You could spy on her instead.”

“Boneh,” said Uncle Cawley, putting down his newspaper. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Loads of things,” said Boneh, still grinning.

“About Gran?”

Boneh nodded.

"I asked Gran about what I had missed and she just said it was all pretty much the same here."

Boneh rolled his eyes.

"What *did* I miss?" asked Uncle Cawley, newspaper now completely forgotten.

"We had a *really* busy summer," said Boneh. "Especially Gran."

"What has my sister been up to?" said Uncle Cawley, looking over at the staircase. Gran was upstairs on her computer, as usual.

"Gran is amazing, " said Boneh. Honey had ambled over to Boneh and put his paws on Boneh's knee. "Sorry, Uncle Cawley. I've gotta go. I think Honey wants me to take him for a walk." Boneh picked up the oversized cat and stood up. Grabbing the leash from the bookshelf and attaching it to Honey's collar, he and Honey headed for the door.

Boneh smiled to himself. It was fun to have a secret for a change, even if it wouldn't last for long.

THE END



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