

CHAPTER ONE: SIRHAN'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Pasadena, California, 1952.

The incessant sound of water running awakened Bishara Sirhan from his nap. “I don’t know how much more I can stand. First it’s little Aida flushing the toilet for hours upon end. And now it’s one of the boys in the back yard. They think they’re wasteful Americans now. I’ll show them what it means to waste!”

Bishara got up from the queen-sized bed donated to the family by the First Nazarene Church on Ranier Avenue and put on his *tarbush*. It had been almost six months, and the elder of the Sirhan family was still wearing his native Palestinian dress: long white robes, open-toed leather sandals and a woven, white turban draped around his graying head.

Inside the little dining room leading out to the yard, Bishara met his wife, Mary, who was carrying a load of wash in from the laundromat down the street. She carried the basket on top of her dark hair, which was braided into a large topknot – Middle Eastern style – making a supporting cushion for the plastic basket full of clothes. She was a thin, big-boned, haunting woman, with dark, brooding eyes and short, stumpy legs. She watched her husband as he hurried past her, and immediately shook her head in exasperation.

“Bishara, what are you doing?” Mary asked in Arabic. “I thought you were taking a nap.”

Bishara gnashed his teeth as he pushed open the screen door leading into the backyard. He didn’t bother to answer his wife, as he seemed to have more important things on his mind. His short, thinly stooped body moved over the burnt grass like an attacking weasel. When he reached the offending party, his hand shot out and snatched the spraying garden hose from the small child’s hands.

“Sirhan, I told you not to waste water,” the father yelled in slowly enunciated Arabic. “Water is a precious gift from God, and we cannot waste our gifts.”

Adel, the eldest of the sons living in the United States, was wearing American Levis and a white tee shirt with “Rock Around the Clock” printed on the front. He often stood-up for his little brother. But unlike his father, Adel spoke English. And, like most other things, did so perfectly.

“But we are not in Palestine, father. This is America, and many children play on their front lawns with the water hoses. When will *we* be Americans, father?”

Bishara Sirhan walked briskly over to the faucet against the white-stuccoed, two-bedroom house and shut off the water. “How can we be Americans when Americans are not Americans,” he instructed, in his British-educated English. “It says in their constitution, ‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ But when I seek employment, I get questions about Jerusalem, but I get no job. Where is my life? Where is my liberty?”

“Papa, water!” Sirhan screamed, standing in the middle of a big mud puddle, his brown, scrawny six-year-old body bare except for a pair of training pants that his mother had bought at the Amvets Store because of his bed-wetting. “I want water!”

By this time, Mary was standing outside too, and her lips were pursed, ready for a confrontation. She wore a gaudy, thrift-store muumuu, with orange flowered print, and black thongs on her callused feet. It was summertime in Pasadena, and Mrs. Sirhan was doing her best to look Californian.

“I’ll give you water, you wasteful little bastard!” Bishara screamed, and he turned the faucet handle until the hose sprayed a thick jet of water at little Sirhan, hitting him directly in the face.

“Mama!” screamed Sirhan, running and slipping toward his mother. Mary grabbed up her son and turned to go into the house.

“If you take that boy inside, I swear wife, I will leave this family forever, and I will never return again!” Bishara shouted, the veins in his neck standing out like blue worms.

Bishara Sirhan left his family that same day, stuffing his clothes, two cartons of Camel cigarettes, and his red alarm clock, into a large duffel bag with *El-Al Airways* printed on the front in blazing blue letters.

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The sun was going down in a smoggy blaze of glory as Mary Sirhan sat on the front porch with her four children. Without her husband, and still at least another year from the church sponsoring her two older boys into America. The times were hard, but she was working for the Presbyterian Church’s Nursery School as a housekeeper. The job paid only two hundred dollars a week, but they gave her lunches and breakfasts, and her youngest – Sirhan, Aida and Munir – were able to come with her free of charge. Her children would all be back in school soon, and then things might return to normal again.

Little Sirhan held tightly to the end of his mother’s dress as he sat in his soiled training pants and pushed a red fire engine up and down the porch steps. He let out a wailing siren’s call every few minutes that brought a “Shush!” from his mother. Each time Sirhan would smile devilishly up at her.

The other three children were playing tag in the front yard of the little bungalow

on Ranier Avenue, as the busy street traffic rushed by them, oblivious to the children without a father.

The Sirhans would go without many material things in their new country, but they chose their own destiny – just as the pioneers had done when settling Pasadena during the gold rush. But this wasn't the gold rush, and the Sirhans were from the Middle East, not back east. The looks of anger and fear from most Americans scared them. But it made the family closer and made them appreciate their church all the more. For they were safe inside the church, and they were accepted, as long as they shouted "Praise Jesus!" and "I testify to God!" in clear English words. But even when they did, Reverend Clarence Bell came out every week like clockwork to collect the forty dollars in rent.

The children in the neighborhood and at the schools spoke to the Sirhan children, but there were often confrontations. "Dirty A-rabs!" they would taunt. "My daddy says you cheat us out of oil. Why don'tcha go back to the desert where you belong? Watcha gotta stink up our town for?"

Adel, Munir, Aida and Sirhan eventually came to deal with the racist taunts – each in their own ways. Adel played music loudly on the Arab guitar, Munir learned to fight with a fierceness that became legendary at John Muir High School, and Aida and Sirhan dove into their school work and became straight-A students.

But, none of the Sirhans ever became American citizens. They held on to their Jordanian citizenship as if it were the link to their identity. They were taught by their mother, Mary, that the Jews made them move from their homeland and that these so-called chosen people were nothing more than money-hungry, war-mongering pagans who probably ran around naked and burnt smelly sheep inside their silly temples. All the while good Christians like the Sirhans kept peacefully to themselves and waited patiently for the Savior to return once again and finally judge the truly wicked of the world – of whom the Jews, Mary said, "were the most wicked of all – alongside murderers, rapists and other law-breakers."

On the night their father left them, the Sirhans all slept together on Mary's queen-sized bed and watched the most popular television show of the decade, *I Love Lucy*. Adel showed some astuteness when he commented that evening about Ricky Ricardo's accent. "He talks worser than we do, Mama. Why don't people get mad at him?"

Mary Sirhan did not answer because she was thinking about her wedding night with Bishara, when she was a thirteen-year-old virgin. She could again feel the young man's hands as they gently held her frightened face in their strong grip.

Mary dreamed about having sex with her husband, and she cried out in her sleep twice during the night. Little Sirhan dreamed about a giant black snake that wanted to drown him in its spraying venom. He could not understand why his heart raced and his body became soaked with sweat. When his mother cried, Sirhan cried too,

and the two clutched each other like the wrestlers who grappled on Channel 5 after *I Love Lucy*.

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That night, inside the Greyhound Bus Terminal on Colorado Boulevard, Bishara Sirhan slept all alone. Whiskey had made him sleepy, and his bus was not due for another six hours.

Bishara dreamt about the Jordan River. He remembered his baptism by the British missionaries who promised that Jesus was a God of peace, and that if he learned to forgive, Jesus would come into his life forever.

IN HIS DREAM, CHRIST WAS BAPTIZED ALONGSIDE HIM, AND BOTH HE AND JESUS WERE SUBMERGED INTO THE WARM WATERS OF THE ANCIENT JORDAN. BUT WHEN JESUS CAME OUT OF THE WATER, ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS A BONE-WHITE SKELETON WITH THE ZIONIST STAR OF DAVID EMBLAZONED UPON THE FOREHEAD OF THE SKULL. BISHARA YELLED OUT IN HIS SLEEP. AND A NEARBY SAILOR KICKED HIS LEG TO WAKE HIM.