

*June 2020: The war against terrorism is being lost as law abiding citizens suffer a diminution of personal freedom. The face of the new enemy is invisibility; its identity obscured in anonymity.*

## **Vigilance**

by John G. Schieman

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# VIGILANCE

JOHN G. SCHIEMAN

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## Chapter 1 Sign of the Times

**Saturday June 20, 2020 4:45 PM PDT**

A gentle, cool breeze swept off the Pacific Ocean as Kasim Jamal paused and took a deep breath. He glanced out across the expansive audience that had, to that point, been attentive to his every word. As Valedictorian, he had succeeded in energizing his classmates to confront and overcome whatever challenges might lie ahead. Kasim had been designated as the Valedictorian of his high school because he had maintained the highest academic ranking among his graduating class for the past three years.

Kasim's five foot eleven-inch frame reflected near-perfect posture and had remained unbending to that point in the program. As he stood behind the podium on the temporary stage at the western end of the football stadium, he exuded a non-boastful confidence. The late afternoon sun was at his back; its brilliant rays obscured by the massive stadium scoreboard. Kasim's jet black, naturally curly hair appeared to glisten as the overhead, stadium lights focused on him. He was remarkably handsome and bore a slight resemblance to a lesser known Iraqi actor from the previous decade known as Alex Uloom.

Three hundred-fifty high school graduates were seated in the first ten rows of chairs. Another fifty rows of chairs were positioned behind the students, overflowing with the graduates' friends and family members. An additional few hundred observers, mostly undergraduate classmates, and alumni were seated on the permanent stadium stands that surrounded the field. Well-armed, uniformed police were visible throughout the stadium and reflected the violent times in which they now lived.

Although Kasim's words had held the interest of the graduates to that point, he surmised that his fellow classmates were becoming increasingly restless as the minutes ticked by. Kasim quietly folded

his formal speaker notes as he gazed upon the expansive gathering and prepared to deliver his heartfelt, closing remarks. His posture noticeably relaxed as he leaned slightly forward. He placed his hands on the podium and began to address the audience for the final time.

“I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the members of my new family, the Stevens, the faculty at Baker High School, and you, my fellow classmates, who are about to challenge all that life has to offer.”

Kasim paused once again, for effect, as he purposely scanned the first few rows of students.

“Four and one half years ago, I left my cherished homeland, Iraq. Both my parents had just been killed by Islamic State sponsored terrorist attacks. I barely escaped with my life. Your beloved Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor welcomed me to this beautiful country of America. I had no family, no friends, no money, nor even a place to stay. I drifted aimlessly within the Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance for months.”

“Ryan Stevens, who I am now honored to call ‘my brother’, had read about my plight on the bureau’s website. He spoke to his parents... now my parents, Brian, and Jennifer Stevens. Soon thereafter, Ryan and I were e-mailing one another almost daily. Five months later, the Stevens family petitioned the United States Government to become my foster parents. In time, I found myself in your remarkable town of San Luis Obispo.”

Tears formed in the inner corners of Kasim’s brown eyes as his throat became so parched that he was momentarily unable to proceed. He reached below the podium, grasped a glass of water, and took a quick sip. As he glanced across the sea of black caps and gowns, he focused on the beautiful graduate seated in the middle of the seventh row, his sister Mikaela Stevens. As their eyes met, he couldn’t help but smile. Her gaze was calming. She grinned back in his direction and flashed him a two “thumbs up” sign of

encouragement. That was all the reassurance Kasim required as he inhaled deeply before delivering his final remarks.

“Think of what was happening in the world in 2016. Terrorist attacks, too numerous to count, were occurring across the globe; in France, in Belgium, in Germany, in Italy, and throughout the United States. The Stevens family, my future family, took an incredible risk when they welcomed me into their home. They did not have to do anything...but they did.”

Kasim chuckled to himself as a slight smile appeared on his face.

“I was cautious at first. Imagine the dichotomy, an Arab refugee suspicious of Americans?”

His comments elicited muted laughter in the audience, particularly among the students. Mikaela and Ryan smiled.

“My caution gave way to gratitude almost immediately. I was warmly welcomed into their family...now my family. I enrolled at Baker High in the Fall of that year, along with Mikaela and Ryan. I was welcomed with open arms by this faculty and the administration; and by you, the students of this fine institution. I’m certain that the education I received was ‘second-to-none’. The genuine warmth I felt was reassuring. And my time as running back on the football team and as a short distance sprinter on the track team are memories that I will cherish all my life.”

“Go Bears!” exclaimed one of Kasim’s team mates from the second row.

The audience laughed openly at the remark. As Kasim prepared to proceed following the verbal interruption, the setting sun peeked out through narrow openings in the scoreboard at his back and sent brilliant pencils of light streaming across the expansive football field.

Suddenly, a recurring flicker of light at the eastern end of the commencement field caught Kasim’s attention and momentarily distracted his thoughts. It appeared to him as if one of the sun’s rays

was reflecting off a minuscule piece of glass or metal that resided approximately six-feet off the ground. Kasim adjusted his gaze ever so slightly toward the source of the light. He struggled to focus his vision beyond the distant football goalpost. He was careful to minimize his reaction to avoid further personal distraction and mitigate the potential of “losing his connection” with the audience.

The entire field that lay before him was more than three hundred-fifty feet deep, the length of a football field and the adjacent running path that circled the field. Despite the distance, Kasim suddenly caught a brief glimpse of a well-dressed man at the far end of the field.

The man’s body had been partially obscured from view near the open end of the field by a training sled that was normally utilized during football practice. It appeared to Kasim that the stranger was taking pictures through a high-powered telephoto lens mounted on a camera. For a brief instant, the stranger poked his head from behind the camera and enabled Kasim to focus on his distinctive, well-tanned countenance.

Under normal circumstances, Kasim wouldn’t have given the situation a second thought. It was, after all, a commencement program. That’s what people did, they took pictures. However, in Kasim’s mind, it appeared as if the stranger was deliberately hiding from plain sight as he pointed the camera’s lens directly at the podium...directly at him. Or at least, that’s how Kasim envisioned it.

Another shout of “Go Bears” blasted from the audience that caused Kasim to momentarily refocus his gaze on the student body seated before him. Kasim smiled, then chanced a second glance back to where the stranger had been standing. He was gone.

Kasim paused, collected his thoughts, and continued speaking as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred...and perhaps nothing had.

“Right, I wish I had thought of shouting that,” said Kasim, as he responded to the student’s outburst. “Last year, with the assistance of my incredible family, I became an American citizen.”

The crowd erupted with applause and rose to their feet as Kasim savored the moment.

“Thank you. Not just for the applause and the standing ovation, but for the generosity and the kindness you have bestowed on me these past four years. That is a debt I will never be able to repay. To the class of 2020, congratulations. Go give them hell!”

Kasim’s final words were the signal for the square, black graduation caps to be tossed into the air, consume the late afternoon sky for a fleeting moment in time, and create a memory that would last forever. The entire audience that had been so perfectly attentive and assembled, disbanded in complete disarray and shouts of joy as parents and students rushed to reunite.

Kasim’s foster parents, Brian and Jennifer Stevens, pushed through the crowd with uncontrollable exuberance. When they finally reached the location where their children had gathered, Brian and Jennifer hugged Ryan, Mikaela, and Kasim with equal intensity and a genuine outpouring of love.

Jennifer began crying at the sight of Mikaela’s tears. That was her nature...she was always emotional like that.

“I love you guys. Words can’t explain how proud I am feeling at this moment. Kasim, your speech was incredible. Thank you,” said Brian Stevens.

“No, thank you, Dad, Mom, Ryan, and Mikaela,” responded Kasim as his gaze shifted across his entire foster family. “You have transformed my life and my entire being in ways you cannot imagine.”

A strange sensation engulfed Kasim as he spoke. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being watched. As he casually surveyed his

immediate surroundings, a multitude of familiar faces greeted him. In short order, his apprehensive feelings subsided.

Amidst the tumultuous roars of joy that permeated the field that afternoon, a small circle of silence seemed to temporarily encapsulate the Stevens family from the noise as they absorbed the tenderness of that moment.

As was typically the case, Brian Stevens abruptly interrupted the family's reflective mood.

"Let's go get something to eat," said Brian as he motioned toward the area where the family automobile had been parked earlier that day.

Brian and Jennifer Stevens were both forty-four years old. They had been high school sweethearts while attending Baker High and enrolled together at the University of Southern California (USC) directly after graduation. Brian majored in nuclear engineering. Nuclear engineering involves the study of fission and its application to sub-atomic physics. Directly following college graduation, Brian had accepted a mid-level position at the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant.

Diablo was an electricity-generating nuclear power plant in San Luis Obispo County, California. After the permanent shutdown of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in 2013, Diablo remained the only nuclear plant operational in the state. The facility encompassed nine hundred acres west of Avila Beach, California. The western-most segment of the property was bounded by a jagged, rocky coastline that jutted far out into the Pacific Ocean. The plant comprised numerous, free-standing buildings, as well as a large structure that connected the two Core unit domes. Properly 'treated', superheated water vented into the Pacific Ocean directly behind the domes. Private roadways led in and out of the facility and were safeguarded by security checkpoints along the way.

Within a few short months, senior management at the plant began to recognize Brian's tremendous potential and placed him in a 'fast-track' executive development program. In 2018, Brian received his third promotion in as many years, He was elevated to the position of Vice President of Operations for the entire plant.

His peers at the plant had generally accepted Brian's promotion as valid recognition for his work ethic, his creativity, and his leadership skills. There was, however, a singular exception. Clark MacGregor had transferred to the plant four years earlier, largely driven by his wife Samantha's insatiable desire for wealth and prestige. She had convinced him that the vice president position was his for the taking. When Clark was passed over for Brian, he and Samantha blamed the decision on the Stevens family fostering of Kasim. Brian Stevens' entire corporate staff was enamored with his family's magnanimous gesture. The notable exception was Clark MacGregor and his wife, Samantha. However, Clark was a good soldier, so he suppressed his animosity while on the job...at least initially.

Brian Stevens had secured summer intern positions for Ryan and Kasim between their junior and senior years of high school. That action only further infuriated Clark MacGregor. He viewed it as an extreme example of nepotism and became increasingly frustrated. He constantly brought that frustration home to his wife. By October of 2019, Samantha MacGregor had had enough. She took their four-year-old daughter, Carrie, and moved back to their home town in Alabama. Her actions triggered severe, repressed anxiety in Clark.

Brian's wife, Jennifer majored in finance while at USC. She began a substantially different career path than her husband; one that was more in tune with her near-term aspirations. She had become certified as a CPA (Certified Public Accountant) within one year after college graduation. She opened her own practice in town because that afforded her maximum personal flexibility.

Both she and Brian had wanted to start a family as soon as possible...Jennifer for sure. Brian was ambivalent regarding the actual timeframe for such an event. Jennifer was head strong, in a

pleasant sort of way. When she set her mind to something important, it usually happened. Brian tended to have a more easygoing personality and frequently took things at face value. In many respects, Jennifer was the “Yin” to his “Yang”.

In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang describe how seemingly opposite (or contrary) forces may be complementary and interdependent in the natural world.

Regardless of their differing opinions and time frames for starting a family, the couple didn't have to wait too long. Their fraternal twins, Ryan and Mikaela were born one year later. Ryan was the older sibling by two minutes. The “All American” Stevens family had now become a reality. All they required was a dog to complete the stereotypical family.

Brian Stevens bore a slight resemblance to actor George Clooney. He stood six foot tall. His hair was dark brown and prematurely greying at the temples. His eyes were a mesmerizing deep blue. Brian also knew how to work that now famous George Clooney smile. Brian had always been a health nut. He religiously hit the company gym at six in the morning for a rigorous half hour workout. He never smoked. When he drank, it was always in moderation, which was saying something for a guy living near the wine country in Northern California. He had had his fill of drinking in college. He never took drugs, not even pot.

Brian fell in love with Jennifer the first time he met her. It was that storybook, love at first sight, romance. He had always been a person who aimed high and fought with all his might to get what he wanted. He had immediately introduced himself to Jennifer and asked her on a date. By their fifth date, he told her that she was the girl he was going to marry.

On the surface, Jennifer appeared to be more subdued than her husband, but was the binding strength within the family. She was drop dead gorgeous. Her favorite actress had been Stana Katic who played the television role of Detective Kate Beckett until 2016.

Jennifer would deny it vehemently, but she ‘fashioned’ herself after the beautiful actress. She had long, flowing dark brown hair, accented by subtle, golden highlights. Jennifer always looked as if she had just left a beauty salon. The color of Jennifer’s hair accented her deep brown eyes and soft complexion perfectly. Like Stana’s character “Beckett”, Jennifer had the ability to convey exactly what she was thinking or feeling without having uttered a single word.

Their daughter, Mikaela, was a heartbreaker. She stood five foot six and tipped the scales at 110 pounds. Her body was to die for; modest sized, perfectly shaped breasts; a slender waistline that led to a shapely butt; and legs that were noticeably toned. Mikaela’s eyes were a mesmerizing deep, transparent blue that she had inherited from her Dad. Her hair had been naturally brown like her Mom’s, but she dyed it blond for the first time in her junior year of high school and never looked back. After all, it was California. A girl has a certain responsibility to look the part. Following the dye job, many of her high school classmate thought she was a dead ringer for a ‘young’ Blake Lively. Mikaela didn’t agree, but loved the comparison.

Mikaela was one of those unique people who looked great regardless of whatever they wore. She looked equally dazzling in cut-off jeans, a tee shirt, and a pony tail that pushed through the back of a baseball cap as she did on the night of her senior prom. She always had a smile on her face and a good thought in her heart. Mikaela was remarkably loyal to her friends and undeniably committed to her family.

Her twin, Ryan, was five foot, ten. A person had to look close to see any resemblance between the two siblings. He had sandy brown hair that he wore a little long. He emulated his Dad in many respects. They were frequently seen in the gym or on the golf course together. Ryan loved the ocean and surfed every chance he got. He bore a slight resemblance to a young Hayden Christensen of Stars Wars™ fame.

Kasim picked up the surfing bug from Ryan early on. The two were inseparable in the water. Mikaela understood the principles of surfing, but never caught the surfing bug.

The Stevens family hadn't yet completed the necessary steps to formally adopt Kasim, but when he was willing to proceed, that would become an eventuality.

Brian Stevens had arranged for a special dinner following the commencement. It wasn't every day that a family graduated three honor students. The Steven' black BMW™ SUV pulled up in front of their favorite restaurant, the Firestone Grill™, shortly before six o'clock that afternoon. Brian turned the car over to the valet and joined the family inside the establishment.

"Mister Stevens, it's good to see you again. Your table is waiting. Good evening Mrs. Stevens. And congratulations to you, Mikaela, Ryan, and Kasim. Well done," said David Wheeler, the host and owner of the establishment.

The Stevens and Wheeler families enjoyed one another's company socially. David, Brian, and Ryan frequently played golf together. Jennifer and David's wife, Helena Foster-Wheeler, had maintained close, personal contact since high school. The families periodically attended one another's social gatherings at their respective homes.

Lorie Martin, the head waitress, led the Stevens' party to their table that afternoon.

"Thank you, Lorie," said Brian.

"You're welcome Mister Stevens," came the polite reply.

It seemed that everyone knew Brian Stevens and he wouldn't have had it any other way. He always felt that going out of his way to 'make an impression' opened doors for him and ultimately presented opportunities that otherwise would not have materialized...least of which was a great table at an outstanding restaurant.

The Stevens family conversation was light and focused primarily on the children's academic accomplishments. Like their parents before them, Ryan and Mikaela were enrolled at USC for the fall. Kasim had received early acceptance at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with a full scholarship in Computer Science. He was proud of the recognition and looked forward to fulfilling a lifelong dream of acquiring a high quality United States college education. Despite his inner satisfaction, Kasim was somewhat saddened by the prospect of separating from his 'true', new family.

Midway through the meal, Brian set his fork and knife on the plate in front of him and inhaled with authority. His gestures were predictable and signaled to the other family members that Brian was about to state something profound; well, "profound", least to Brian's way of thinking.

"Children, your mother and I are so proud of all of you. Honors, Dean's list, straight A's, awards for community service, and the list goes on and on. Those financial scholarships don't hurt either. Mom and I wanted to do something special to commemorate the occasion so we rented a condominium on Kaanapali Beach in Maui for two weeks, beginning July third. Mom and I will be staying the first week, but the second week is all yours. Just stay out of trouble and enjoy yourselves."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Ryan, as he pounded his fist so hard on the table that the silverware momentarily rose above the table.

"Love you, Dad and Mom," said Mikaela softly.

Kasim was slow to respond. The incident at the field remained a distraction. He felt uneasy. Jennifer noticed her son's pensive mood almost immediately.

"Kasim, is everything okay?" asked Jennifer.

"Sure Mom. I'm speechless, that's all," said Kasim. "I've always wanted to go to Maui. I've heard it's beautiful."

“Glad you all like the idea,” said Jennifer, unconvinced by her son’s response. “Dad and I wanted to give you a graduation gift that you would remember for a lifetime. Sounds like we have accomplished that.”

Their children were ecstatic. If it were up to them, they would have begun texting all their friends with the good news and pressuring them to get their parents to do the same. But, that would have to wait. Their parents didn’t have many rules. They always believed that if they provided their children with the proper guidance, then they would usually make the correct decision whenever confronting a challenge. They hadn’t been disappointed thus far. However, Brian and Jennifer did have a rule about never texting during dinner that was strictly enforced...and the kids never seemed to mind.

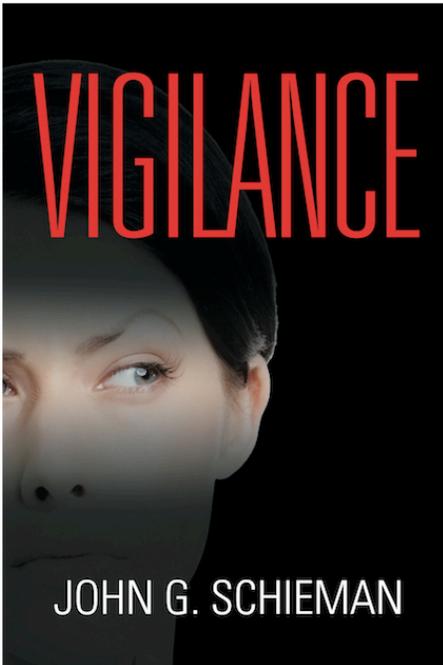
On the drive home, the Stevens family stopped for their favorite dessert, frozen yogurt. Twenty minutes later, Mister Stevens pulled the family car into the driveway of their San Luis Obispo home that rested high above sea level on a hill that accommodated seven other multimillion dollar homes. Their 4,200-square foot house was an architectural marvel of natural stone and glass. On a clear day, the Pacific Ocean was visible from the rear of the home.

The most recent census had indicated that San Luis Obispo maintained a population of approximately 46,000 people, having grown less than two thousand during the preceding twenty years. The area was affluent and it was stable. Household annual median income was more than \$100,000. There were a few tracks of modular homes that accommodated lower income families. Cal Poly University was the area’s major employer. The Diablo Nuclear plant where Brian worked was the fourth largest employer in the area although previously announced operational closings had already taken its toll...and was only going to get worse.

The downtown area was quaint. Main Street was adorned with numerous small shops and a fully functional street car system. The town also boasted an overabundance of local bars and taverns that catered to the multitude of college students from Cal Poly. A

substantial police presence was also visible as they navigated through town and across the campus on Segway MiniPro Transporters™.

The beaches were spectacular with Avila Beach among the most popular. Overall, San Luis Obispo was a wonderful place for children to grow up...or so it seemed.



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