

SUSPICION OF EVIL

A Novel By: Amy Auer

It was five years ago that Kaycee Beaumont buried her husband and three small children. Still haunted by the tragedy, she decides to put her house up for sale and move as far away as she can. Although it takes over a year, her best friend and real estate agent Brenda Stellars finds her the perfect place. A place far away and much different than the life she is currently used to. A secluded country home nestled on the outskirts on a nearly forgotten town. Excited for a fresh start, Kaycee packs her belongings and heads for the country. What Brenda doesn't tell her is that her new home is also the site of several tragedies also involving small children. When Kaycee arrives, she is awestruck at the looming presence before her. Although uneasy at first, she is determined to put the past behind her. But the house itself has more in store for her than she bargained for.

CHAPTER ONE

The smell hung heavy in the salted air, coming closer with each crashing wave that pounded the shoreline. Kaycee Beaumont increased the speed of her morning jog to a near sprint hoping not to get caught in the torrential downpour that was riding in with the angry surf. After the accident, she had taken up jogging as a method of therapy—not that it had helped any—and knew she still had nearly a quarter of a mile to go when the first droplet of rain spattered her back. Knowing it was useless to run in what was now beginning to feel like quicksand, she came to a stop, reached down, took off her running shoes and began walking the rest of the distance home. She hadn't made it very far when the first droplets of delicate rain turned into a pounding surge. Although the rain had felt like

needles pricking her back, she was enjoying the way the saturated sand oozed between her toes with each step she took, and at a snails pace, walked the rest of the way home.

Up ahead, even through the slanting sheets of rain, Kaycee could see the "For Sale" sign at the edge of the property, sticking out of the sand like a grave marker. She couldn't call it *her* property anymore or even *her* house. Ever since the accident it was simply *the* house or *the* property. And until it sold that's the way it would remain. The property had been on the market now for over a year and still there were no bites. Not even a nibble. And until she was able to sell, she would have to remain there and relive that fateful night, day after day after day.

At the bottom of the steps leading to a substantial back deck, Kaycee stopped and wiped her sopping hair from her eyes and face, then looked up. It was then that she saw the shadow of a figure standing under the overhang of the house well above her. Taking the steps two at a time she made her way up towards the deck.

"It's about time," a voice squealed. "I'm soaked!" Kaycee couldn't help but laugh when she saw the condition of her best friend, Brenda Stellars. Always perfectly dressed and made up, she now stood looking more like a wet dishrag than the perfect starlet she was so use to being called; with her auburn hair plastered to her face and black mascara trailing down her cheeks.

"Not funny!" Brenda complained. "Open the damn door would you?"

"It's unlocked."

"What!" she shrieked. "You're to tell me I've been standing out here in this...this hurricane and the door has been unlocked the whole time?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm telling you. Besides it's not a hurricane," Kaycee laughed, "Just a little tropical storm."

"Whatever. Look at me!"

"I kind of like the new you." Kaycee said, unable to stop the laughter behind the words. "Come on, I'll make some coffee and get you some dry clothes."

Opening the sliding glass door, they walked into the kitchen area where the warmth was a welcoming relief from the blowing, slightly chilled rain. Kaycee let her soggy shoes fall to the floor, where they landed with a loud thump, then left the kitchen to change into dry clothes. "Start a pot of coffee, will you?" She yelled from the living room.

Within a few minutes, Kaycee returned to the kitchen wearing a pair of cut-off denim shorts, and a Miami Dolphins tee-shirt. Her blond hair was towel dried and hung half-way down her back in a neat ponytail.

"Have you had breakfast yet?" She asked Brenda, handing her a pair of stretch shorts and a similar tee-shirt.

"No." She answered, and then disappeared into the nearest bathroom. No doubt trying hard to fix her muddled appearance, Kaycee thought.

When she returned, Brenda was as organized as she could possibly be under the circumstances, and helped herself to a cup of steaming coffee. She took a seat at the kitchen table and sat in silence, sipping her black coffee unsure where to begin.

Outside the rain was crashing into the side of the house at an alarming speed and gusts of wind were picking up immensely. Its whistling fury was easily heard over the sounds of roaring waves and sizzling bacon.

"You sure this isn't a hurricane?" Brenda asked, still not wanting to approach the pressing issue of her visit.

"Positive." Kaycee answered. She removed the crisp bacon, set it on several layers of paper towels to drain, and then poured a generous amount of scrambled egg mixture into the hot skillet. After adding fresh peppers, onions, and mushrooms, she turned to face Brenda.

"Out with it," she said, "and don't play dumb. I know you too well and I know you wouldn't be caught dead out in the rain let alone out in a storm without a reason."

"Can't a girl just come and visit her best friend?"

"Brenda!"

"All right...all right. I found a house." She finally managed.

"Come on Brenda, you know I can't move until I sell this house."

"Yes you can and you know it."

"I'm not touching that money and that's the end of it!"

"Do you really think Mark would want you to be like this?"

Ignoring her, Kaycee turned back to the stove and stirred the eggs. She dropped two slices of wheat bread into the toaster and slammed down the arm.

"He's dead Kaycee." Brenda continued. "It's been five years and I'm sorry, but you can't stop living your life because of a terrible accident. He left you that money so you could go on living."

"You think I don't know that he's dead!" Kaycee screamed. Ignoring the toasted bread, she spun on her heels and with tears welling up in her eyes she faced her best friend, a raging fury inside.

"You think I don't know my husband is dead? You think I don't know my kids are dead!" She howled.

Brenda, having been through this so many times before knew that

the only thing she could do now was watch, helpless, while Kaycee crumbled to the floor below, releasing a flood of tears.

After what seemed like hours, Brenda finally got up from the table and went to Kaycee's crumpled body. She put her arms around her and comforted her, best as she could.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself Kaycee. I know it hurts but you know as well as I do that *not* spending that money isn't going to bring them back."

"Please go." Kaycee managed.

"I'll go, but I'm going to leave the information on the table for you to look over when you feel up to it. It's just what you need honey, trust me. You need to get out of here and start over. You can't stay in a place where the memories haunt your every waking moment. You've got to start living again."

"Please...just go." Brenda gave her a final hug, then walked to the front door, opened it and ran to her car in the rain. Once inside, she couldn't help but feel the acceleration of her heart and wondered if she was doing the right thing.

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It wasn't until smoke began filling the kitchen that Kaycee managed to find the strength and pull herself up from the kitchen floor. She looked at the stove and immediately saw where the smolder

was coming from; the scrambled eggs she had previously started were now a mess of bubbling black. The smells of burnt onions and mushrooms were repulsive, yet she took her time, not caring if the skillet suddenly burst into flames, not caring whether she lived or died.

"Please mommy, put it out." It was the faintest whisper, yet loud enough that Kaycee spun around as though someone had just screamed in her ear.

No one was there.

Taking her time, Kaycee wiped the wetness from her face and reached for the charred skillet, ignoring the immediate blistering on her right hand. She let the skillet drop into the sink with a loud crash, and turned on the cold water. Upon impact it hissed and sizzled, then released mounds of acrid smoke.

Kaycee turned away from the sink, reached into a cabinet and removed a glass and a bottle of vodka. She took a seat at the kitchen table and then poured herself a generous amount of the clear liquid. Up until the accident she had never been much of a drinker, and even now she only drank when she heard the voices in her head.. voices of her dead children. So, rather than fall off the edge of insanity and into the depths of despair, she chose to drown herself in the bottle instead.

She reached out to pick up her glass and couldn't help but

notice the information that Brenda had left on the table earlier. She took a lengthy drink of the clear poison then looked down at the manila folder in front of her. She nearly dropped her glass when she saw the picture of the large house. It appeared to be staring back at her, reaching out for her. That was impossible she thought. Or was it?

Unsettled, Kaycee drained the liquid in her glass, set it down on the table and then proceeded to unclasp the photo from the front of the folder to take a better look. There was something different about the picture she thought. Something...that was vaguely familiar. *But what was it?* She wondered.

The house itself was rather impressive looking. It seemed to be a rather substantial two-story Victorian. Or was it a three-story? It was hard to tell from the photo itself considering a large portion of the house was hiding behind monstrous trees. After staring at the photo for an undetermined amount of time, Kaycee finally came to the conclusion that the house had a rather ominous look of sadness to it. Yet she liked it. She liked it a lot. And it was at that moment that she knew she had to have it. It was as if the house itself was calling out to her, inviting her into its space. She didn't need to read any of the information that was stuffed inside the folder, nor did she want to. She wouldn't change her mind. The price was located on the picture directly under the house itself. If she used the life insurance money Mark had taken out shortly before

his death, it was a price she could easily afford to pay for directly, without the worries of a thirty-year mortgage. And for the first time in over five years, Kaycee Beaumont was finally able to look forward to something.

She poured more of the Vodka into her glass and raised it towards the ceiling, toasting to a new beginning.

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Enraged, the tropical storm burst into a monsoon of rain, sending sheets of moisture dancing horizontally across rapidly flooding roadways. Typical winds erupted in violence, stripping palm fronds from recently secured homes, sending them diving and twisting to their demise on the sodden ground below.

Brenda Stellars turned right on Palm Street, and at a snails pace began the final stretch home dodging blowing debris and disorder. What would have normally been a fifteen minute drive home from Kaycee's beach house had turned into an hour of unrelenting terror.

Although she had been born and raised in Florida, the storms; which are rather persistent in the area, were not a passion with Brenda and she knew they never would be. At the tender age of eleven, she had unexpectedly obtained the permanent scars that would forever haunt her world.

The day couldn't have been more perfect. Sunshine blazed in the

sky, emitting warmth that was inviting, not overbearing. While parents sunbathed lazily on the beach, kids frolicked in the nearby surf; splashing and playing in the salted water, running and diving into uncomplicated waves. Brenda was no exception. She had been playing in a nearby sandbar with another girl her age, tossing a beach ball back and forth. Missing the ball yet again, Brenda hopped along in the water towards the brightly colored ball. She dove to retrieve it and felt the sudden tap against her leg. Knowing it was nothing more than a fish bumping into her leg while swimming by she ignored it. Laughing, she began hopping back in the waist deep water towards her new friend when she heard her parents calling to her. She looked towards them and immediately noticed that the sky was changing to a darker color, blocking out the sun. She felt the first droplets of rain and knew that it was time to head back. For the last time, she tossed the ball high in the air and watched it land in the water with a splash in front of her friend. Within seconds she felt the sudden pain in her leg and watched while the water around her turned blood-red. Screaming, she began kicking frantically trying to make her way back to the beach. In the obscure distance she could just barely see her parents running towards the water. It was then that her world went black.

She wasn't sure how long she had been unconscious, but when she awakened there were people surrounding her, covering her with blankets trying to stop the massive flow of blood, as well as keep her dry from the continuous rain. She knew she had been bitten by a

shark, but to her amazement there was no pain. In the distance she thought she could hear the blades of a helicopter coming closer and once again, her world went black.

The storm came without warning. What had started as a simple rain shower had swiftly turned into a massive storm. The rain was torrential and waves were crashing into the shore, vigorously increasing in size.

Brenda had been safely strapped on a gurney and taken into the helicopter where an oxygen mask was placed over her mouth and nose and an IV was quickly placed into her arm. As soon as the emergency aircraft began to lift off the ground, Brenda once again awakened and then slowly peered out of the window. It was then that she saw both of her parents being swallowed by a colossal wave.

Once she was safely parked under the sturdy carport, Brenda began prying her fingers from the steering wheel. She rubbed the stiffness from her knuckles and then wiped her still damp hair from her face. Knowing she was worse for wear and suddenly not caring, she got out of her car and went through the side door of her house under the carport.

"I'm home." The moment she stepped into her house her insides warmed to the aromatic smell of garlic coming from the kitchen. Although she never understood why it took someone nearly all day to make pasta sauce when you could easily empty a jar and warm its

contents on the stove, she never questioned Jackson. He was an exceptional cook, and all of his cuisine was well worth the wait.

She walked into the kitchen and saw him standing over the simmering pot on the stove adding fresh herbs and spices to the concoction. She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist and then kissed his back.

Turning from the stove, he looked at her and laughed. "You look like hell."

"Gee, thanks," she said, then kissed his cheek. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Hey, how did it go with Kaycee?" he asked, turning back to the stove adding the chopped oregano.

"Same as it always does." Jackson knew exactly what she meant and went back to stirring his sauce.

"She really needs to get out of that house Bren," he tossed over his shoulder.

"I'm working on it." She yelled back.

After a few minutes, he could hear the water running in the bathroom and a menacing grin suddenly highlighted his face.

"And I'm the one who's going to make that happen." He said, knowing he couldn't be heard.

As much as he hated it, Jackson knew he was doing the right thing. And if Brenda ever found out what he had done...well he would deal with her when the time came.