

TWIN TIME

by Olga Werby & Christopher Werby

EXCERPT

“Ma’am? Ma’am?”

The police officer had been trying to speak to the woman, Emma Orlov, but she was clearly in shock, unable to respond. Another officer had been managing the woman’s husband, Greg, trying to convince him to escort his wife away from the scene of the fire.

A neighbor called the rest of the family while the police started the evacuations of nearby homes. The house had already burned to the ground, but the fire stubbornly refused to go out, and the firemen worried it might jump to the neighboring structures.

There had been only one critical injury: an old lady they had pulled from the fire. An ambulance had already taken her to the hospital. However, Mr. Orlov insisted that their daughter was also in the house. The girl was autistic, he said, and mute except for her own name: “Sasha.” The firemen hadn’t been able to locate the girl, but at least there was no evidence that the girl had died in the fire—although it was too early to tell for sure. Still, an alert had been issued: “Svetlana Orlov, a nineteen-year-old special-needs woman, missing after house fire.”

“Sir? We’re going to have to ask you and your wife to leave now. It’s getting dark.”

“She’s in there somewhere,” the girl’s father said in a flat tone. “I know it. I dropped her off myself.”

The officer realized he wasn’t going to be able to get the parents to leave voluntarily. He looked around. The trauma center people should have been here already.

He looked back at the house. It was one of those old mansions built in a Spanish style almost a century ago—stucco and tile with a clay roof—one of the first constructions in the hills of San Mateo. It had been quite lovely, but now it looked like a bomb had exploded inside. Hardly anything was left standing. If there was a body in there, it might take a while to find it.

He shook his head. He had been one of the first on the scene and had been there when they pulled the elderly woman out. She said she was alone; she was adamant about it. She was badly burned, but before they took her away, she insisted that they get in touch with her lawyer. Strange, he thought at the time, but people tend to do strange things when their world goes up in flames.

Still...