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This novel is written exclusively for Right Truth Blog (www.righttruth.typepad.com) and its readers.

In loving memory of my precious
Sara (7/25/1951 to 12/13/2003) who always
encouraged me to write from the heart and was
at once both my greatest critic and my most
loyal fan.

In love with you always!

And...

To the greatest dad anyone like me could ever
have hoped for: Joseph Stanley Godlewski
(11/29/1918 to 04/14/2008).

You gave me life. Thank you!

www.rjgodlewski.com

Chapter Sixteen

Room 4287
The Pentagon
Washington, D.C.

“Let me make this perfectly clear,” Meredith LeDuc straightened her black, Italian-style eyeglasses to illustrate her point as she shifted uncomfortably in the plush chair situated behind her immaculate desk. “The Saudis are our allies and I don’t care about what your instructions say; I’m your supervisor and I’m permitted to change your assignments at will. You will not trash the Saudis by embarking upon some wild goose chase.”

Seth Carmassi flashed a brief look of sarcasm towards Jonas Prinkler seated towards his right. “I suppose you’ll next tell me that Hugo Chavez is the President’s brother-in-law?”

“Mr. Carmassi,” Meredith spoke in one of her trademarked ‘I’m your superior and although you’ve done more to combat terrorism than I ever hope to, you still have to listen to *me*’ tones “I have *never* liked your abuse of our national allies and I will not – repeat will not – permit you to go off on one of your wild tangents.”

“Supervisor LeDuc,” Jonas spoke, hoping to deflect criticism away from Carmassi. “I, too, believe that the Saudis are planning something unusual in regards to their investments within the New York City area and this business with the *U.S.S. McCaide* is certainly grounds for concern.”

“Mr. Prinkler, you are near enough to retirement *not* to desire any unfortunate wrinkles within your record...”

“Are you threatening Jonas?” Carmassi hated bureaucrats, especially opportunists who ticket-punched their

way to the top instead of earning their respect through dedicated experience. "This is supposed to be the 'new, open Pentagon' where concerns are accepted at face value, is it not?"

Meredith's posture slumped slightly, assuming a forced casual stance as she removed her eyeglasses and chewed a bit on the black frames. "It is. But I cannot allow you to sour the good name of an American ally through the unscrupulous investigation of an otherwise benevolent friend."

"Oh give me a damn break..." snorted Carmassi as he pushed back deeper into his own chair. "Saudis? Benevolent? *Hello?* Anyone care to remember 9/11; fifteen of the hijackers were Saudi nationals. The Wahhabi schools that are preaching hate within the United States? Benevolent? My frickin' ass..."

"That'll be enough of that!" scolded Meredith as she leaned forward against her desk, forfeiting any care of her eyewear. "Whether you personally like it or not, the Saudis are our friends and I won't tolerate you dragging their name through the mud with your insinuations of ill intent."

It was Carmassi's turn to counter the move, leaning forward upon the desk. "Listen, I've been chasing the bastards all over the damn planet and everywhere I find terrorists I find Saudi involvement and vice versa. You know, I took an oath many years ago to defend my nation and its people against enemies both foreign and domestic and I *still* take that obligation to heart!"

"This is a new era." voiced Meredith, relaxing her position a bit. "Let's face it; you're a dinosaur. A throwback to the Cold War when battles were going on all over the planet..."

"What about today?" chirped in Jonas, oblivious to his need for being there in the first place.

"Today it's different." explained his supervisor. "There's no longer anyone trying to vaporize the planet..."

"Oh?" Carmassi felt as if his lower jaw had just hit the floor.

"You know what I mean."

"Frankly, I don't think that I do. We still have terrorists out there and the Islamist variety want to vaporize the United States. I don't give a shit about the rest of the world, but when

America is at stake I toss caution into the wind and go after the bastards.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Like I said; you’re too prehistoric.”

“And you use too many clichés.”

“Regardless, the Department of Defense can’t let you go around shooting up innocent people...”

“Hey, I’ve *never* shot anyone that didn’t deserve to be shot.”

“My apologies; I merely meant that you can’t go around starting wars. It affects us. It affects the State Department.”

Carmassi thrust up and began to pace the floor. “Now State’s involved? Those guys are worse than you pinheads.”

“We’re all part of the *same* government, Mr. Carmassi, State handles diplomacy and we handle things when that goes awry.”

Carmassi paused briefly in his steps and took a deep breath. “So if your previous instructions to, and I quote: ‘organize a new effort to evaluate ‘future’ threats against the United States and its allies through data and information cataloged previously’ is null and void, then what may I ask am I to do now?”

“And what of me?” Jonas wanted to show some solidarity with his friend even if he hadn’t quite been invited to the supervisor’s office.

Meredith smiled, cupping her hands behind her head in an uncharacteristic manner. “Oh, they’re *still* in effect; my instructions that is. I just need the two of you to embark upon another mission for the time being.”

Carmassi felt something coming; something incredibly inconvenient for his temperament and for a bit couldn’t decide on which way to pace; taking a step towards the front and then spinning around for a second before retracing his steps back again.

“Nice dance move.” Meredith laughed. “Care to tango?”

Carmassi snorted incoherently and made a move towards the door. “Right now I’m going to dance my way back to that damn thing you call an office and pen my resignation.”

Hesitantly, Jonas stood up to follow his partner.

Meredith exhaled audibly. “We have Muhammad ibn al-Ilah Talib on ice in Crimea. I need the two of you to fly over there and interrogate him.”

Carmassi froze in his tracks so quickly that the heavier Jonas almost bulldozed him over. He knew that he had been had and had *big*. “The Sorcerer?”

“Uh huh.” Meredith pressed her lips together, trying not to smile too noticeably.

“*El Supremo* Saudi terrorist?”

“Yep.”

Carmassi flashed a brief suicide gesture to Jonas, using his hand as a pistol against the side of his head. “One, we’ve been after that sonofabitch for years. Two, you know damn well he’s working with the Saudis. And, three, how long were you going to wait before you told me?”

“You didn’t have the necessary need to know.”

“Bullshit!” snorted Carmassi as he headed directly towards his chair and sat down with an audible plop. “If *anybody* in this frickin’ place has a need to know, it’s me. That sonofabitch nearly cost me my life.”

“That’s precisely why we didn’t tell you; at least until we were one hundred and fifty percent sure that it was *him*.”

“What I’d like to know,” Carmassi glanced around the room, trying to come to grips with the latest news. “Is why all of the BS about not antagonizing the Saudis. You *know* Muhammad is going to bust U.S.-Saudi relations wide open.”

Meredith took a deeper breath and spun around in her chair to face the windows that sat just beyond. “The President is pitching a new energy proposal to Congress. It won’t fly until the Legislature sees the Saudis for what they really are; opportunists who’ve studied under Machiavelli.”

Carmassi pounded his fist upon his supervisor’s desk, startling the woman. “God, I hate politics.”

“Sometimes people have to do strange things.”

“It would make far more sense to just go ahead and take their damn oil.”

“Now we just might have the excuse.”

Carmassi raised his left eyebrow as he cocked his head towards the right. “Are you saying that we’re going to war against the Saudis?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Uh, yeah.” Carmassi knew a dodge when he heard one. “So how do I – we – fit into this little caper of yours?”

Meredith frowned over the implication. “Caper? The United States has recently learned of the apprehension of its Number One terrorist enemy and I need our top man to fly over to Kerch and interrogate him.”

Carmassi looked over at Jonas and shook his head softly. “Here it comes. You’d better get use to this if you’re going to tag along with me.”

“Here comes *what?*” asked Jonas nervously. He knew that he was basically nothing but an overweight and out of shape analyst. “What do you mean?”

“Tell him, Meredith.”

Their supervisor retrieved a set of keys from her desk, fumbled briefly to locate the proper one, and then unlocked the top right drawer of her credenza and retrieved a thick folder with the words **TOP SECRET: OPERATION CRYSTAL BUNKER. FILE # 297B1** emblazoned across an emblem of the U.S. Joint Civilian Counter-Terrorism Operations Group and handed it to Carmassi.

“We need you to do your best on this creep.” she spoke softly, almost carrying her voice in a whisper. “I won’t be of much assistance; our official policy is that the Saudis are our bosom buddies.”

Carmassi was beginning to understand the initial tone of their meeting as he quickly scrutinized the pertinent facts contained within the folder. “Are we flying commercial?”

“A C-130 is waiting for you at Andrews. The crew has been told they’ll be receiving a ‘package’ with direct orders to obey.”

“And we’re the package?” Carmassi found enough humor in the notion of an exceptionally heavy package by the name of Jonas and offered a brief smile.

“After you leave my office,” Meredith added, elevating her voice a tad higher than before. “You’re on your own. Your communications channels are outlined in the file.”

Carmassi motioned Jonas towards the door with a slight nod. “What supplies can we requisition?”

Covering her mouth slightly with her right palm, the supervisor feigned massaging her chin in an effort to hide her mouth, though the pretense was officially unnecessary; no one could see into her windows from any vantage point. “Take whatever *you* need to carry out your duties. Call upon your experience, Seth.”

Carmassi beamed a broad smile. *God, I love redheads.* He knew that the cargo aircraft was voluminous in its capacity and that the seriousness of their mission dictated that its load carrying function would be entirely theirs. “Yes, Meredith. I’ll take the usual.”