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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!

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Chapter Sixty-Four

February, 20xx
South of Esendere, Turkey
(Near the Iranian border)

Seth Carmassi paused cutting away the thread protruding from his AKMS sling and stared at the reflection caught by the blade of the knife. His half-year growth of facial hair seemed to make him about twenty years older than he really was. The salt-and-pepper texture of his beard appeared decidedly lacking in the darker spice. The lines torn into his face reminded him of the harrowing seven-month journey through the worst of the Middle East.

The crevices folded deeply into his skin spoke of the three-day firefight with Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. Of bribing the lanky Syrian border guard. They hinted at the long, slow, journey across that country concealed within the bowels of a produce truck and a final mad dash across the border into Turkey under the cover of a blistering winter night.

Seth wiped the knife off on the green camouflage trousers that he stole off a parked Turkish army truck and returned it to his scabbard. He tightened the black and white keffiyeh wrapped around his neck before crawling closer to the small fire that warmed the hut. The Arab headdress contrasting sharply with the intent of the uniform.

In the corner, the orange glow highlighted the figure of a snoring Mahmoud al-Walid while his young companion, Haytham al-Ashab, sat nearby struggling to read a worn copy of the Quran within the light of the flickering flames.

Softly, Seth reasoned that the cause for his archaic appearance was the result of his two prisoners trudging along on his escape to wherever destiny sent him. Keeping the two Arabs at bay while being shot at by Hezbollah's finest drew more

strength out of him than dodging the 7.62 x 39mm rounds that whizzed past his ears. Now, that battle seemed like eons ago to the American.

Haytham paused in his recitation of Islamic prayers and glanced towards his captor, hearing the words of resentment uttered by the American.

“Don’t mind me.” Seth belched, the odor of the recently devoured lamb swirling around his nostrils. “Go back to reading your novel.”

“I am reading the words of Allah.” Haytham declared.

“You are reading fiction.” retorted the American as he threw another piece of wood onto the fire. “Nothing but fiction. It’s not even original fiction at that – your so-called prophet stole his ideas from just about every other religion on the planet.”

“These are the words of Allah.”

“No, they are the words of the translator. God speaks to us through our hearts. That there, what you are reading, is simply a book. Nothing more. It is simply a device whereby the publisher makes a buck to feed his family and perhaps boink his secretary in the process.”

Haytham stiffened his posture, showing his anger over the American’s blasphemous attitude. “These are the words of Almighty Allah.”

“In about five minutes, those words will become kindling.”

Haytham’s expression froze while he contemplated the American’s thoughts and then instinctively embraced the book against his chest. “You would not dare burn the Holy Quran!”

“Damn straight I would!” barked the American. “If it comes down to avoiding freezing my ass off in these hills I’ll throw your ass onto the fire as well!”

The young Arab nervously looked at his sleeping companion and then around the cramped hut, seeking an escape route from his potential offense to Allah.

Seth motioned his rifle towards Haytham. “Relax. I’d rather burn your damn friend there. We’d have enough heat for the millennium.” He looked at his watch. 12:35 A.M. “You need

to concentrate on getting some sleep too. It won't be easy tied to fat ass there, but I cannot take any chances that you guys won't try to attack me. Then, I *will* have to burn your stupid Quran. Along with you, I might add.

"As for your precious book, you need to learn the fundamentals of life. Survival. That book might be inspirational – I'm not sure how, but I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt – but inspiration can only go so far. Inspiration can't warm a frozen body. Inspiration can't cook our food. In that case, those pages would do you far more good as fuel for our dwindling fire."

The Arab slowly shook his head. "I would not freeze unless Allah wanted me to die."

"Criminy. Are you always on? Every time something happened on this little trek of ours, you kept bringing up Allah's will. Don't you think that he expects a little effort from you in return? Do you not think that perhaps, just perhaps, God plopped you down on this earth of ours and said 'Have at it, young Haytham! Do whatever you want with what I have given you and you find about yourself?'

"And what of that book you're so worried about? You people will butcher a cartoonist because he drew a caricature of your prophet. You don't believe in idols, you say. You said Muhammad didn't want you to worship anything but Allah, you say. So what do you do? You idolize a damn book as if it were God himself. Guess what? God can zap you right between the eyes with an asteroid if he wanted to. No mere book is needed to voice his opinion of your life."

"We are to protect the Holy Book." Haytham fought for a rebuttal.

"Hogwash. You don't think that Christians deal with this sort of thing every day? Hell, we can't even build churches in your countries because your so-called 'religion of peace and tolerance' bans them. Peace and tolerance? Peace is when the likes of you Muslims get booted off this damn planet by the other five point whatever billion souls that have to put up with your whining crap.

"Ever see Catholics blowing up cities because some creep desecrates the Eucharist? How many gays are beheaded because

they interrupt Sunday Mass to protest against what has been Church teaching for two thousand frickin' years? If people in the West treat you bastards like some subhuman species it is solely because you jerks *act* like a subhuman species. Why don't you guys ever try to grow into the international community instead of constantly trying to fashion something else out of it? If Allah is so damn special, then I don't think that he would cower away from any mere competition."

"You are an infidel!" roared Haytham, his outburst momentarily disrupting the snoring of his companion.

"Yeah, well, thank God for that." Seth spread out a blanket onto the floor and rolled over onto his side, positioning his rifle for a quick discharge should either of his bound prisoners make an attempt upon his life. "Better to be an infidel and free than a Muslim with no say in his life..."

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