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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 Thirteen

June 20xx
En route north from
Arshintsevo, Ukraine

The weather wasn't much to speak of, even if it was summer and still a respectable 24° C. The wind was light and from the south and what few clouds tainted the sky it could've been a sight to be painted. The problem was that Haytham was reared within a desert climate and anything less than hot required him to dress up and at the present he was only permitted to wear his navy trousers and blue short sleeve shirt as befitting a typical United Nations worker.

Haytham had an extremely bad day since their discharge from the ferry down near Arshintsevo. The truck's 210 horsepower diesel engine barely lugged their load and sputtered nearly the whole distance, acting up again as it had during their drive in Turkey. He didn't like the way that the Ukrainian customs officials eyed him; having the unnerving sensation that they were questioning his integrity every time the damn vehicle conked out. Surely, they knew, the United Nations would've sent a vehicle in much better condition.

Mahmoud himself was of no use, preferring to remain near the rear of the vehicle during the inspection. There was just something sinister about his supervisor's actions; as if he would've preferred that Haytham be exposed to any trouble that arose from their deceit. The young medical student could not help but feel the role of a scapegoat and it tugged at his consciousness. To quell matters, he tried to fit in; to act as would

any young person – Arab or otherwise – when visiting a foreign country, particularly a Western one.

During his aggravating drive, he tried listening to music on a small cassette player but Mahmoud grew agitated over his subordinate's selection and tossed Haytham's bootleg copy of the *Rocky Horror* soundtrack out through the window. After that, the young Arab feared broaching the subject of music and had to endure the remainder of the drive listening only to the truck's sputtering engine and his occasional disuse of the clutch. It was definitely an environment that caused him to second-guess his participation and more than once he felt that Mahmoud could detect his inner turmoil and this might've set the younger man up for being just such a scapegoat.

Once, during a brief rest stop where the elder man appeared to be lost within a nap, Haytham thought seriously about abandoning the truck and racing off to safety. He forfeited this plan, however, when he remembered the punishment for defectors. Muhammad's standing order was for death – of a most heinous kind, known somewhat affectionately as re-Islamification – for any deserters and Haytham had seen this instruction carried out to the letter many times before. So many times, in fact, that several of his comrades committed suicide rather than face an angry supervisor.

It was not a thought that he wanted to entertain – to kill himself or be killed by being dunked slowly in acid – and so he succumbed to doing whatever he was told and whenever he was told to do it. In other words, he was trapped – for life. Haytham never considered himself to be a bad person as he suspected that few people of his generation did. He just felt that there was 'something' missing within his life and a friend told him to make some use of himself by visiting a particular mosque on King Saud Street in Riyadh. That's when bad things really began to happen; when his world was turned upside down and evil became not the enemy of the good but millions of innocent Westerners.

He never could understand how so many *billions* of people could be so inherently evil but when he asked his *ulema* about this discrepancy, the religious scholars simply told him

that he was too young to question their *fatwas* and that the *al-shabab* of Islam would be better seen and not heard. As he sat there behind the steering wheel, patiently waiting for Mahmoud to decide which left to take, Haytham decided that the seeds of doubt had not been planted by the Westerners he had pledged to kill but the mullahs who had set Islam upon a course of self-destruction through their own misuse of young, gullible students such as him. The thought hung low in his gut and for the briefest of moments he wished that he had been carrying a very contagious disease instead so that he might lean over and spit in the face of his supervisor.

“Turn down this road.” Mahmoud bellowed, his face still buried deeply into an archaic map of the city. “The prison is three kilometers away. This will place us near enough to the Master to be able to render support when he signals us.”

Haytham croaked a barely discernable “Yes.” and cranked the steering wheel hard over towards the left. He thought that it was quite pretentious to believe that Muhammad could signal them at all. If he was indeed in the hands of the Russians, Ukrainians, or even the Americans he would’ve probably already been raced out of the country or, perhaps, killed during his *n*th torture session. Signal *them*? That action required much more faith than the young Arab was willing to admit.

“We will meet the rest of the men there.” added Mahmoud, softly as if he was unwilling to disclose much to the troubled youth. He quickly added “You will obey them and aid in their retrieval of the supplies.”

“Yes.” Haytham mumbled again; a bit more softly than before. “I will obey their commands.” *Anybody but yours, you pig.*

“Good.” Mahmoud commanded more than acknowledged. He let his fingers trace an unmarked path along the various roads and streets of Kerch, finally stopping on the only prison whose location would be known to inspectors from the United Nations. This left him with a ‘gray area’ of several hundred meters where Muhammad would be held.

He had bribed enough Russians inside the Viper’s Lair to know pretty much which direction it was, but none of these

people were sufficiently well-placed to inform him of Muhammad's precise location within the facility. The fact that several buildings located adjacent to the notorious prison were constructed in a similar fashion to serve as decoys only compounded the situation further.

The plan was simple; his men would take up strategic positions within the area while he undertook the pretense of setting about to inspect several legitimate political prisoners known to be held – because he had long ago charged them with the task of being incarcerated as political prisoners – at the primary prison in Kerch. This ruse would enable him to await the expected signal from Muhammad and then his men would aid their master by undertaking a daring raid into the facility aided in turn by those bribed inside the building.

It was a gamble, to be sure; but Allah was on *their* side and not the infidels. Mahmoud lowered the wrinkled and yellowed map, concentrating his gaze upon the broadening streets. It would not be long now, he thought to himself. *Soon, Master.*