

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2008 by Ronald John Godlewski

Cover graphics © 2008 R.J. Godlewski

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews

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 Twenty

June 20xx
Outside *Viper's Lair* Complex
Kerch, Ukraine

Haytham could hear the sirens that caused the commotion; could see the guards and other support personnel rushing towards the rectangular buildings in the distance, positioned diagonally from where he had brought the truck under orders from the Ukrainians but he had more serious things to consider at the moment; considerations that sat heavy on his soul, forcing his head to perspire more with each passing second.

Mahmoud had given him implicit instructions to feign some vehicular malfunction intended to cover their lengthy stay at the prison complex while awaiting their master's deliverance and the young Arab was desperately trying to fashion some sort of mechanical problem when he first heard the distant but quite noticeable wailing of alarm bells and a klaxon seemingly originating from the center of the four rectangular buildings hidden within the trees that comprised something of a box with three structures parallel to one another and the fourth across their far end.

Believing the best feint to be the obvious one with the truck's engine exposed and he scrutinizing the motor beneath the cab while lighting a cigarette to reinforce the image of frustration, Haytham had been trying to formulate a breakdown of some artificial sort when disaster actually happened. When the sirens began to sound and the attitude of the nearby soldiers changed from one of being inconvenienced to the likelihood that

the disturbance was no mere drill, he had inadvertently knocked his heavy wrench from its perch and the wayward tool impacted against a fuel line displacing the tubing and soon the liquid began to leak out upon the engine. Had this been all then perhaps his ruse would've worked well but the commotion had also caused Haytham to drop both his match and his smoke and before long, the fuel ignited.

It was not a powerful fire, to begin with, as diesel never had the sour reputation of its sibling, gasoline, but Haytham began to fear that luck definitely wasn't with him that day as his attempts to fan out the flickering flames only aggravated the situation and before he knew it he had a sizeable and very smoky fire brewing underneath the tilted white cover.

Rushing to retrieve the fire extinguisher which seemed a bit out of reach due to the position of the vehicle's cab, Haytham lost track of where the Ukrainian guards had gone, where the few Russian soldiers had positioned themselves, and fully ignored the arrival of the automobile carrying several Arabs known only to Mahmoud and his superiors.

The fire now raging a few centimeters away from his person did not appear very large from the outside but he could not help but imagine that somehow, in light of all that had happened, his vehicle would choose to explode with him being trapped tightly underneath the cab. For this reason, most especially, the young man decided that he should avail himself of the vast parking lot and he quickly retreated from the smoking truck. During his hasty exit from the vehicle, Haytham had a moment or two in which to notice the other Arabs.

They had arrived in a pair of black Mercedes, three men in the first, four in the second; parking directly behind Haytham's own vehicle as if it were fairly routine to mix the luxurious sedans with an archaic, ex-Soviet truck. All seven men swarmed around the rear of the United Nations' vehicle apparently as oblivious to the fire underneath the cab as had Haytham been of their arrival. Two of the men leapt into the back of the KamAZ-5320 holding what appeared to be large hammers or hatchets in their hand and started striking at the wooden crates which made up the vehicle's cargo.

Haytham saw the rest of the men immediately form something of a work detail, undoubtedly positioned to retrieve the weapons and explosives that had been carried into Ukraine under the guise of humanitarian supplies for political prisoners that he was sure were of less value to his superiors than he was.

The young medical student amused himself with the surreal image of Arabs unloading lethal weaponry from the back of a UN vehicle while at the same time a fire was slowly engulfing the vehicle unbeknownst to them. He attributed their lack of attention to military professionalism at duty – something that he lacked – and so continued his observation irrespective of whether he might have proved useful to them in their effort.

Mahmoud's orders had been simple – create a reason for remaining – but he said nothing about partaking of the gunrunning that apparently was now the focus of so much concentration. Haytham could not help but laugh; the sight of thick, black smoke pouring out of an all-white truck while a squad of Arabs frantically tried to unload armaments while the Ukrainian guards were distracted seemed to something straight out of a Western slapstick. He began to understand how those who his superiors were trying to kill en masse could conduct life with such levity. Sometimes one just had to laugh at the obscene.

Haytham's actions were hampered by his conflicting desires to aid and to flee. He wanted to cry out "Hey, buffoons! Our truck is on fire!" but perceived of several reasons in which he might've been accused of sabotaging the vehicle in order to thwart their own actions. Sometimes he wanted to make a break for it; to flee across the large parking lot and keep running until exhaustion diminished his fear but he knew that sooner or later, Mahmoud's men would come looking for him. This inner turmoil caused him to stand there, transfixed by momentary confusion, and simply stare at the work being conducted at the rear of the cargo truck while its cab disappeared into a cloud of dark smoke.

For several minutes, the Arabs simply hacked away at the wooden crates, tore them open as soon as the weapons inside could be retrieved, and passed the armaments towards those

waiting at the back who quickly placed the instruments of destruction into the backseats and trunks of the Mercedes automobiles. As they did so, the smoke from the fire at the front slowly worked its way up from the wheel wells, out from the grille and ventilation gaps beneath the passenger window, and from underneath the back of the cab itself.

At first, the smoke had been little different than the chugging puffs that the vehicle released when he had fought to drive the mechanical beast from their origination in Turkey. No doubt it had released similar fumes within the very ferry that brought them across the vast Black Sea. Then, several minutes into the chaos, Haytham noticed that a much deeper and sinister black color had arrived. The smoke was heavier, more billowy in nature, and seemed to transform itself into a shape resembling a human head. Transfixed by the spectacle, he wanted to call attention to the manifestation; he wanted to scream out to the world “Hey! Forget about the damn guns! *Look at this!*” but he never had time to voice his concerns before the smoke gave way to a brilliant flash of light.

A towering orb of orange flames erupted from the cab and Haytham could see the ripple effects of the shock wave slide across the truck’s cargo body towards the rear where the Arabs momentarily froze in their actions with some having their jaws descend to their basement level. Haytham’s own mouth seemed to have parroted their actions for he felt an intense heat soar down his throat. His legs lost the battle for rigidity and he fell backwards hard upon his ass as his eyes did their best to remain focused upon the scene of the blast.

The ball of flame had erupted from the diver’s side fuel tank, itself positioned just beneath the front of the cargo box and the shock of the blast consumed the entire cab and a good quarter of the box itself. The shock wave leveled the men trying desperately to unload the cargo and shrapnel tore at the windshields of the parked sedans. Haytham could not help but compare the explosion with dozens of suicide truck bombings that he had seen videos of, from either his training or on the international news, and lacking a better description, this is how he thought the event looked.

He knew not whether the final explosion resulted from an opportunistic detonation of fuel, the armaments that were being unloaded from the rear of the truck, or whether some form of explosive device was carried secretly in the truck. He only knew that events had taken a very nasty turn and being so close to death forced him to reconsider his options for the future.

www.rjgodlewski.com