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This novel is written exclusively for Right Truth Blog ([www.righttruth.typepad.com](http://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 Twenty-Three

July 20xx  
Bagerovo Air Base  
West of Kerch, Ukraine

The orange-red sun shone lazily upon the checkered concrete of the former Soviet Air Base, highlighting the clumps of sage-colored grass and competing weeds that broke through the disjointed sections. The long, barren runway, once designed for subsequent use by the returning Russian *Buran* Space Shuttle, appeared to be just another reminder of communistic failures of the past. The entire airport sat in ruins, neglected by time and master; long forgotten by opportunity and fortune. A few Western industrialists had eyed the airfield as it sat near some of the Black Sea's most underappreciated white sand beaches, but none seemed to grant the region any future beyond that which rested solely upon crumpled documents and colorful *Post-It*® Notes discarded within distant development offices. At least this was what the outside world thought.

The approaching MC-130P *Combat Shadow* dropped out of the sky quickly, rapidly lowering its altitude much to the discomfort of those aboard the large four-engine turboprop aircraft. Its black tires kissed the pavement with a sharp screech amidst a plume of bluish-white smoke as the thundering propeller blades retracted in pitch to aid in slowing down the monstrous speeding bird. The runway itself was sufficiently long to permit even the largest aircraft to slow without any mechanical aid whatsoever but the crew needed to divert the airplane towards the disused hanger that sat beckoning in the distance like a vagrant worker desperately seeking employment.

The abandoned, cream-colored steel structure wasn't the only reason that the crew needed to vacate the runway quickly.

Less than a minute behind the first aircraft, an EC-130J *Commando Solo* Psychological Operations aircraft came soaring down upon the massive runway leaving a second trail of rapidly dissipating bluish-white smoke spiraling off into oblivion. It, too, braked early in order to turn the peculiar-looking aircraft off of the runway and towards the giant hanger in the distance, thrusting its massive propeller blades into reverse to aid in the effort. Each gray aircraft was ushered out of sight within minutes, securely housed beneath the towering apex of the steel roof, engines silenced and the world outside left to its own desires as if it had all been a strange television commercial for some politician's concept of urban development.

Inside the broad expanse of the building, however, it was decidedly different; a herd of patrol vehicles and support personnel crowded around the aircraft with all of the dexterity of the crew of a nuclear carrier. They were professionals each and every one, and the Ukrainians knew intimately that American use of the old base was paramount to their peninsula's economic recovery. Besides having the oft-overlooked luxury of eating, the Crimean residents took their role in the fight against radical Islamists very seriously.

The portside crew door of the MC-130P creaked opened, and out stepped Seth Carmassi and Jonas Prinkler into the protective environment.

"Ah, Crimea;" Carmassi inhaled a deep breath of cool morning air. "Freedom from the 'think they haves.'"

"I want to throw up." grumbled Jonas, staggering past his companion, his right hand cupped tightly against his mouth. "You call that a damn flight? I've had more enjoyable root canals!"

Carmassi tipped his navy ball cap towards the flight crew as they descended from the cockpit. "We made it, didn't we?"

"Yeah, but my intestines are back in Warsaw." Jonas crouched low on the concrete floor until his ears ceased ringing. "And you had to order all of that damn kielbasa and pierogis..."

“He he he.” Carmassi stooped down to help his overweight friend stand up. “Let’s not forget the golabki.”

“How the hell could I?” burped Jonas, breaking free from Seth’s support. “You did *that* on purpose, didn’t you?”

The younger associate threw his hands up, feigning offense. “Hey, *you* were the one that ordered seconds...”

“Thirds.” Jonas belched deeply again, before shifting his voice to the higher pitch of sarcasm. “That’s because that jerk flying this sonofabitch betrayed me by flying all nice and smooth-like during the previous four legs.”

Carmassi was about to take his friend to task with a didactic shake of his hand when he was stopped by the approach of a familiar Ukrainian soldier.

“Mr. Carmassi.” the tall and distinguished-looking officer spoke without hesitation. “Sir, we have a *major* problem...”