

**LADA RAY**

**GREEN**

*Accidental Spy  
Iraq Prequel*

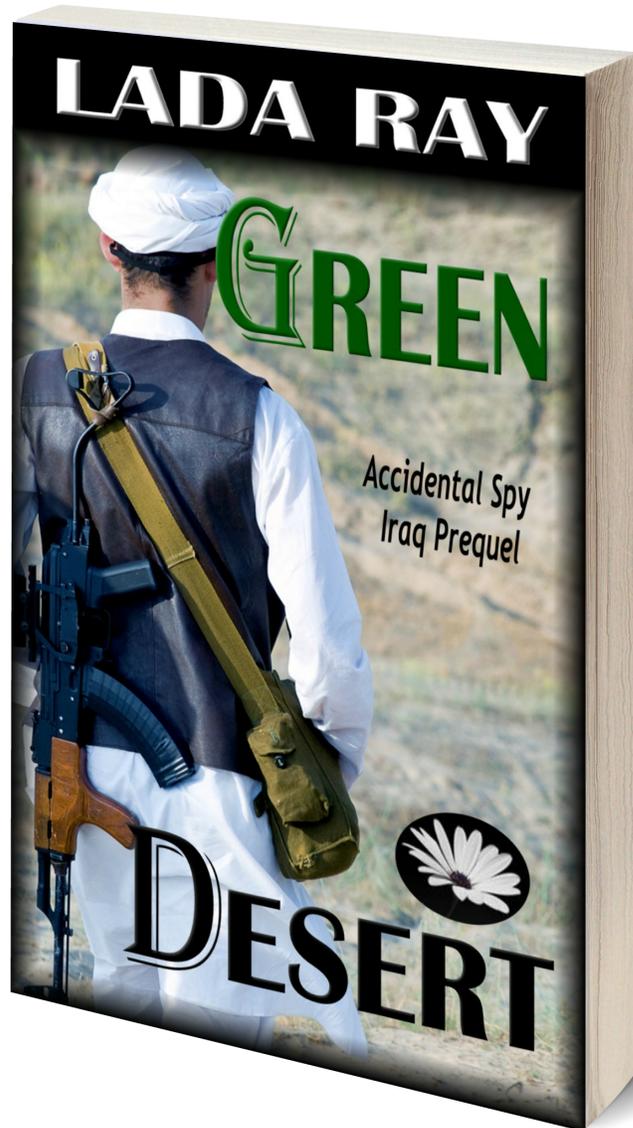


**DESERT**



# Green Desert

Accidental Spy Series Iraq prequel





# **GREEN DESERT**

*Accidental Spy Prequel novelette*

**Lada Ray**

Ray House/EARTH SHIFT

*Lada Ray*





## Reviews

FIVE STARS

*"Riveting story with powerful message!" Meredith Carvin*

FIVE STARS

*"This story will rock your world." Bill Tillman*

FIVE STARS

*"A powerful, gripping and entrancing story. The author's ability to take a topical subject and combine it with talented descriptive writing and creativity always thrusts the reader into the very heart of her books." J.J. Collins, Author (London, UK)*

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## By Lada Ray

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*Being in the right place at just the wrong time is her specialty.  
She mastered this fine art to perfection.*

*Her name is Jade Snow, a young international journalist,  
who four days ago arrived in Baghdad for a documentary of a lifetime.*



## GREEN DESERT

*“One day, the Iraqi desert will be a garden...again.”*

*Mohammed al-Tikriti, suicide bomber, former University of Baghdad student*



*2007, Iraq*

He looked up and wiped the sweat streaming down his face with a trembling hand. Eight a.m. Baghdad sun knew no mercy even at this hour. He must concentrate, just a few more minutes! He stood next to his shabby, dusty Corolla, with faded taxi markings on it. The alley was deserted and deathly quiet, as expected. But just down the hill, barely thirty meters away and fully visible from his vantage point, was the intersection of the busiest road in the city.

Almost time. They should be here any moment.

He took an envelope out of his pocket and almost decided to leave it by the gate of the nearest house, securing it with a rock, when he saw an American press crew - a cameraman and a tall, slim woman, disguised as a man (who was she kidding?) - setting up their camera next to the intersection.

He simply couldn't believe his luck! Allah is merciful, he hasn't deserted him in this hour of judgment! He cast a quick glance around, and another stroke of luck! A young boy, no more than eight or nine, rounded the corner, carrying a heavy jug of water, and made his way through the alley.

"Hey, boy! Come here, little boy," he called, waving temptingly his last two dollar bills. "Want to make some real American money?"

The boy set his water jug on the ground and cautiously edged closer.

The man handed him the envelope. "I want you to give this after the explosion to that pretty lady dressed as a man. Do you see her?"

The boy's shrewd eyes shot in the direction of the American press crew, and he nodded, giggling. Then, another thought made him frown.

"What explosion?" he asked suspiciously.

"You'll see," said the mysterious man. "The most important thing, stay hidden right here until after it happens. Understood?"

The boy nodded.

The man gave him an encouraging smile and got into his Corolla. Time!

He started the motor and quietly rolled closer to the intersection. Immediately, he heard the rumbling noise of a huge American truck, then he saw it. Praise Allah! Yet another stroke of luck - the monstrosity was full of soldiers. A big man with sergeant's insignia sat in the cabin, next to the driver. Good! He'll aim right at him. An officer is even better than mere soldiers.

"Allaaaahu Akbar!" He slammed his foot on the accelerator and with a desperate cry launched his car forward, like a missile.

The big sergeant in the front seat turned his head towards him. The last thing the man's mind registered was surprise in sergeant's blue eyes.

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Being in the right place at just the wrong time is my specialty. I mastered this fine art to perfection. My name is Jade Snow, I am an international journalist, and four days ago I arrived to Baghdad together with my crew to do a documentary about the Iraqi war.

The first two days here normally feel like your lungs are about to explode from the ever-present thick yellow dust. Then, you get used to it. The key is to cover your face and drink lots and lots of bottled water. Bottled, because you obviously can't trust what's coming out of a tap.

In four days, I've seen enough Green Zone to last me a lifetime, but little else. The Green Zone is by far the nicest place in Baghdad. Some of the palm trees have been toppled by explosions and you can still see traces of shelling on the walls of the opulent former Saddam's Palace, presently the US military headquarters.

But our luxury hotel's swimming pool area is always full. You can get a chilled beer or a margarita served by the pool side, blond American women strut here in bikinis, and American businessmen shake hands on the latest reconstruction deals.

My hot-blooded Latin cameraman, Alejandro, has not been wasting his time. While I've been trying to figure out how to get us out of the Green Zone and into action, he's been spending quality time in the company of a confident-looking brunette, a reporter for one of the networks, and a smiley army PR specialist. Later, I spotted him whispering little nothings to a cute, blond private, who kept blushing and throwing adoring glances at "the glamorous media man." I didn't mind. Let him enjoy himself today. Work starts tomorrow.

It's very different outside this heavily guarded area - desolate, dangerous, ugly, and hard to breathe because of the desert dust. It's highly advisable, especially for women, to stay inside the Green Zone. Many journalists here are satisfied with the daily military briefings, in which we are told only what the military wants us to know.

But I can't settle for that. I came here to shoot what I hope would be an award winning documentary. I am suffocating behind these walls. I have to know what's going on out there, in real Baghdad! All I need is transportation.

"Fine," surrendered the captain in charge of transport. I've been besieging him since day one and, finally exhausted, he gave up.

"Keys. Your jeep is over there," he pointed at a bunch of cars in the nearby lot. "The green one."

"Thank you, Captain," I said, feeling the happiest I've been since arriving to this inhospitable place.

"Don't mention it," he responded grouchily. "But I must advise you that you are venturing out there at your own risk. I suggest you at least wait for the convoy. It's leaving in an hour. Two Humvees and a truck. Better travel with them - safety in numbers."

"Can't do that, Captain," I said brightly. "Another day perhaps. Today, the plan is to shoot some footage of real life: streets, people, marketplace... It won't work with soldiers around. But I appreciate your advice all the same."

"All right," he said, giving up. "But at least, dress in man's clothes. It's safer. This world is not very favorable to women, especially pretty Western women," he added, attempting a smile and failing miserably.

It seemed like a sound advice, so I quickly borrowed a pair of cargo pants, safari shirt and a khaki cap from Alejandro. I found a silk scarf and tied it around the pants, because Alejandro's belt didn't have enough holes in it. The scarf did a satisfactory job of holding up the cargoes and added some bulk to my form. After rolling up the pants so they wouldn't drag on the ground, I checked my new look in the mirror and satisfied, got into the jeep.

We found a good vantage point, a busy intersection, next to a marketplace. Deciding to do some general footage first, we started setting up the camera on the corner. I had a good feeling about this particular spot, hoping we might be able to get some good angles here. The camera started rolling.

"Pan right, Alejandro. Now, a tad to the left. Try to catch that family with those cute little kids," I directed my cameraman periodically.

"Very good," I went on, and was going to add that now I needed him to focus on the marketplace, when we heard the rumbling noise.

"It must be the convoy the captain was talking about," I murmured. Sure enough, moving towards us was the leading Humvee, followed by a huge armored truck, with at least fifteen or sixteen soldiers on board, two of them manning machine guns trained on both sides of the street, and followed by another Humvee. The truck was now almost parallel with us, a mere twenty feet away.

"Get this!" I mouthed to Alejandro through the deafening noise. But he was already focusing his camera on the convoy. I lucked out with Alejandro as my cameraman. He was experienced and I really didn't need to remind him of such things.

As the truck passed us, the broad-shouldered sergeant in its cabin nodded to me and I saw a smile in his blue eyes. I waived back at him. At that very moment, I heard a noise coming from the quiet alley behind. Both Alejandro and I turned to see what was going on.

Like a bullet, an old Corolla shot out of the hidden alley, and went straight for the truck. Some kind of a package was tied to the car's front, where during weddings they usually tied wedding dolls. Alejandro, a consummate cameraman, immediately trained his camera on the charging Corolla. I only had the time to think, *but it's so tiny compared to that giant truck...* when I got that urgent gut feeling, which I usually referred to as "my well-honed intuition."

"Run!" I yelled, and quickly dragged Alejandro into the alley. We barely had time to duck behind a protruding rock, when the soldier with machine gun on top of the truck started firing. But it was too late; Corolla rammed into the truck at full speed, smack where the blue-eyed sergeant sat. A huge explosion rocked the intersection.

The noise was deafening, fire raged, panicked and bleeding people ran in all directions. Alejandro and I were about to dash to the site of the explosion, hoping we could help. But at that moment, a new explosion rocked the street and we had to duck again.

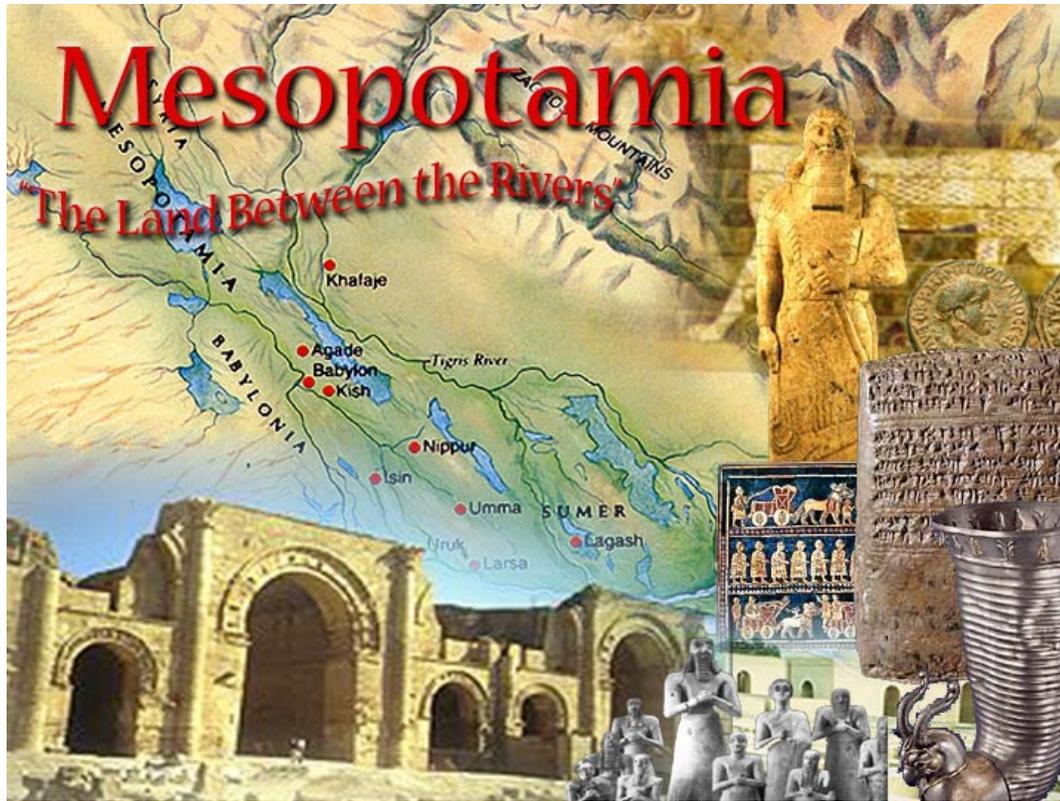
It was hopeless. No one over there could've survived these two explosions, plus the fiery inferno. We stood, watching the flames, wiping sweat, dust and soot off our faces, hoping against hope that someone had survived, and not knowing what to do next.

And that's when someone tugged on my sleeve. I looked down, surprised. A small Iraqi boy stood next to me.

"Did *you* just tug on my sleeve?" I asked.

In response, he silently handed me an envelope. I took the envelope and my jaw dropped as I read: *Why I became a terrorist*. Inside I found several pages, written in a small, tight handwriting in what appeared to be decent English. I looked up to ask the boy where he got this letter, but he was already gone. I couldn't believe what I was holding in my hand. It was the story of the suicide bomber, whose deadly act I just witnessed first hand!

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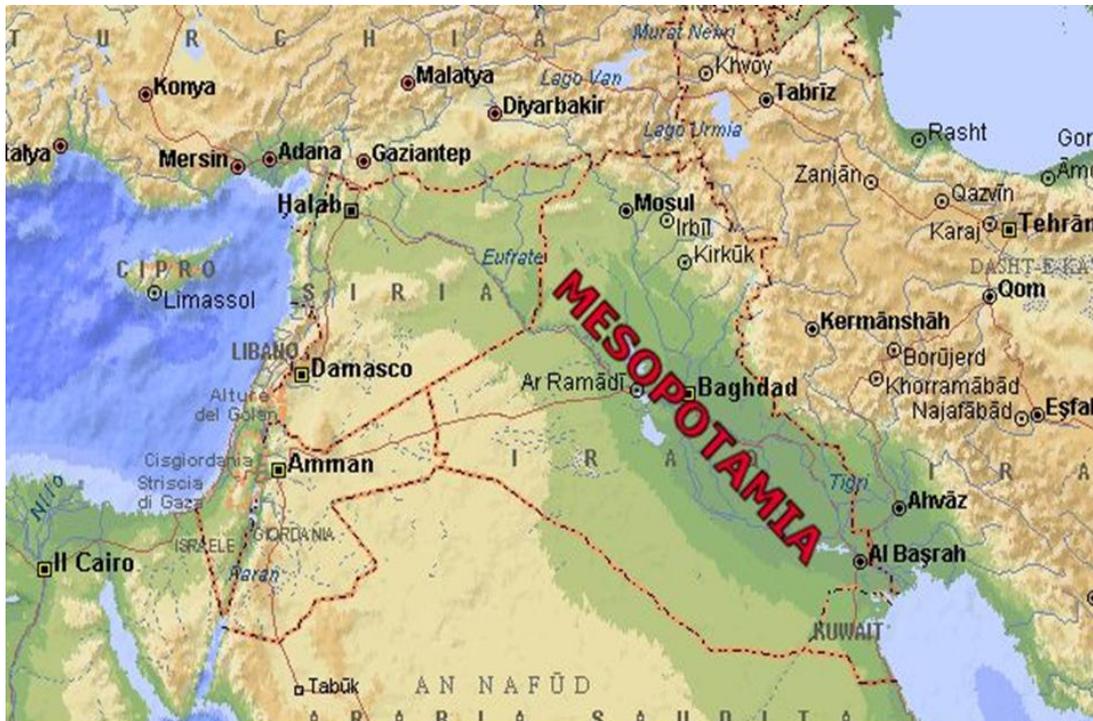


My name is Mohammed al-Tikriti and if you are reading this letter, it means that I am dead and that I've taken as many Americans as I could with me to the grave.

I wasn't always like this. There was a time when I was a biology student at the University of Baghdad. Flowers were my passion, especially daisies. European flowers, they don't grow here, in the desert. I had a poster of a huge field of daisies in my room. Every time I woke up in the morning I'd look at them and dream.

I became obsessed with an idea. What if, I thought, I could invent a way to make the Iraqi desert bloom, like those incredibly lush fields of wild flowers that grow everywhere in Europe? What if I could turn the desert back into a garden?

It wasn't always a desert. In ancient times, Iraq, then Mesopotamia, was called the "Cradle of Civilization." The mighty Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations prospered in the fertile Tigris-Euphrates river valley. They built the world's most advanced irrigation system, which lasted for nearly ten thousand years, created the world's first writing system and for the first time ever started recording history. Mesopotamia prospered until the medieval Islamic Golden Age, when Baghdad was the cultural and scientific center of the Middle East. Extensive gardens bloomed everywhere, but the desert had already begun its relentless march.



A contemporary map of Iraq and the surrounding region showing Mesopotamia (literally, "between rivers").

The fact is...people never appreciate what they have, until it's too late. And so, people of Iraq fell prey to their own success and prosperity. They overused water from the rivers, until they dried up, depleted the rich soil, until gardens turned to saline desert dust. Mongol invasion did the rest. Much of the irrigation system that sustained the area for many millennia, was destroyed. As the gardens disappeared, so did prosperity.

My biggest dream was to bring gardens back to my people, to make my country prosperous again. And several years back, when we still had Saddam, I honestly thought that my dream was a reality. I worked hard on my degree and practiced my English, German and French. One day, I hoped to study in London, Berlin or Paris.

My father was a taxi driver. He owned two cars. One of them - a Corolla - he drove himself, another - an old Ford - leased to the man named Abdul. The income from two cars was enough to send me to the university and to keep a household, consisting of my mother, my favorite sister, Aliya, and my two younger brothers.

My father was, perhaps, a bit loud and short-tempered, but generally, a good and optimistic man. He was also considered something of a free thinker. Under Saddam, let's just say, it was not encouraged. Once, in a company of close friends, having been drinking, he remarked that Iraq would benefit from free elections. The next day he was arrested and taken to prison. He was interrogated and beaten there, but because he was a Sunni and because he had some connections, after a week they let him go.

After that incident, father never spoke about politics again and forbade us to ever mention it, as well.

And so, we lived quietly in our family home on the outskirts of Baghdad until Americans came. That's when everything changed.

One day, father received a phone call, asking him to pick up a couple of people from an area considered dangerous. At first, he said no. But the man offered him four times his usual fare. Times were bad for taxi business. Fewer people got out of their houses, many had no money to pay for a taxi and Baghdad streets oftentimes resembled a battlefield. But father still needed to feed the family. So, he said yes.

Turned out, the two men were "high value targets," as Americans call them.

When father brought them to their destination, American soldiers ambushed them. In the shooting, father was wounded. Not seriously, just a flesh wound. But because he was there, he was taken together with the other men, to Abu Graib.

We started getting worried when he didn't come home that night. The following day, I went to look for him, but found nothing. I kept looking, and the next day, I stumbled upon father's Corolla. It was sitting by the curb, abandoned, windows broken, dashboard crushed, tires flat. I towed it back home, using our second car, the Ford. It took me two weeks to fix it.

Meanwhile, father had just vanished. We diligently checked all the hospitals and prisons and finally found him at Abu Graib. They told us that he was an insurgent and that visits were not allowed. Mother started getting chest pains and often she would lie down for hours, moaning. Aliya, who was only fourteen at the time, took over mother's responsibilities. I left the university and started driving father's Corolla in order to feed the family. We continued trying to get to see our father, but months passed and they wouldn't allow us near him. Neighbors suggested we should hire a lawyer. The lawyer turned out to be very expensive, but he brought us new hope.

Then, one day, seven months later, they let father go. They said, the others admitted that he had nothing to do with insurrection and that he was just their taxi driver. I suspected his jailers knew father was innocent since the beginning, but only let him go after our lawyer threatened them.

He came home a different man; all black and blue from beatings, his left wrist broken, his kidneys shut. Sometimes he coughed out blood. But worse than that, father wasn't himself. For days he would sit in a chair and stare at the wall. His eyes became dull and unseeing, breathing shallow, appetite non-existent.

We called a doctor, who prescribed rest, good food and a lot of expensive medication. I worked sixteen hour days to pay for his medication, to feed everyone and to keep this family afloat.

At least mother was getting better. Of course, every pair of hands was now precious. Someone had to look after father, someone had to take care of the house and cook. Aliya, at fifteen, did the lion share of housework, as mother's heart was still weak.

Then, father's health started deteriorating, but the medication he needed more than ever was getting more and more expensive. What I was making was no longer enough. We started selling whatever we could. The time came when there was nothing else to sell, except our house, our cars, and ourselves.

Abdul, the driver of our Ford, has been asking us to sell it to him. He couldn't offer much, but that money would still be a big help until hopefully father got better. But I resisted selling the old Ford. After all, it still was additional income. Plus, I was hoping father would get better and he'd drive the Corolla again, while I could drive the Ford.

Aliya, who was about to turn sixteen, and who was blossoming into a beautiful young woman, proposed that she find a job. Mother started yelling at her that a decent young woman from an honest, Allah fearing family, should stay home and think about a husband, not a job. Aliya said nothing and neither did I. But after everyone went to sleep, Aliya and I sat quietly in the kitchen.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"Rashid, you know him, the one who owns that big clothing store, with all those pretty dresses, has offered me to be a nanny for his children. He has three boys and a girl. His wife is pregnant with their fifth. She has a difficult pregnancy and she needs help. They like me and I could work several hours a day, then get back home in time to start dinner."

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea," I said, "we need the money badly. But how are you going to get there and then back home? You know I have to work all day and would only get home late at night."

"Rashid's house is only thirty minutes by foot from our house. I could walk," said Aliya excitedly. It appeared that to her, a short walk twice a day sounded like a great adventure. Unfortunately, life of a young woman in Iraq offers few opportunities to venture out. A woman is supposed to stay home, cook, take care of her family and be obedient. I understood Aliya's yearning. But there was nothing I could do. I was now the head of the family. It was my job to uphold tradition. I had to be firm.

"No," I said sternly. "That won't do. You shouldn't be walking alone. A beautiful young woman like you should never go out of the house unaccompanied. You know that, sister. Besides, it's too dangerous."

"So, what do you propose, brother?" asked Aliya, and I heard a hidden note of impatience in her voice.

"Well, I can't believe we are even discussing this. Mother will not like it. But if you are going to work there, I'll drive you in the morning and pick you up in the afternoon. End of discussion!"

"Yes, brother," agreed Aliya, demurely lowering her large, black eyes.

"Whatever you do, don't leave Rashid's house until I arrive, understand?" I reiterated, to be absolutely clear.

"But what if you have a well-paying fare at that time?" remarked Aliya reasonably. "I am a grown woman now," she added proudly, "I could manage on my own."

"No," I shook my head. "You will only work there on one condition. You'll wait for me to pick you up. Promise!"

"Of course," said Aliya, again lowering her eyes obediently. She was an exemplary woman - hard-working, meek, respectful. She'd make some man very happy one day. There were many suitors knocking on our door already.

Still, something in her posture didn't seem very obedient. I looked more closely. She'd always been a good sister and a good daughter and did what she was told. But I grew up with her. Underneath this front she had a curious and independent heart. I'd watch her carefully and try not to be late, I decided... even if I had to refuse a fare. My sister's safety came first.

And so, it was decided. The next morning, I took Aliya to Rashid's house, a large mansion with white columns, a fountain and a gleaming, tiled courtyard. They seemed like a very nice family. I was sure that Aliya would be happy working there.

The money Aliya earned was godsend. For about three weeks everything went well and we were now able to breathe a little easier. But it proved difficult for me to pick her up in the afternoon. Sometimes it meant refusing a perfectly good fare because that would have made me late.

That fateful day, a man asked me to drive him to the vicinity of the Green Zone. I looked at the clock and was about to say no because I was cutting it too close. But he waived a bunch of dollars in my face. I shook my head again, but he offered to pay triple the usual fare - in dollars! We needed this money so badly that I said yes. I thought that if I drove fast, then quickly turned around and took a shortcut I knew, I would be only thirty minutes late. I knew Aliya was impatient, but she would wait for me - she would! That *was* our agreement!

And so, I let the man out near the Green Zone. After he paid in full, I turned the car around and drove back as fast as I could. Reaching the shortcut, I congratulated myself on making good time, when I heard the explosions. People were running towards me, yelling that there was an ambush and that the Americans were shooting.



"Don't go there," yelled a man, running past my car. "It's too dangerous, you may be killed."

"What's happening?" I asked, stopping the car.

"They attacked," The man yelled. "Several people had been killed. It's very bad, don't go!"

I couldn't get anything else out of anyone, as the crowd just kept running past me in a panic. It took me thirty minutes to get back to the main road because of all the running people blocking my passage. Now I had no choice but to take the long way.

"Whatever you do, Aliya, don't leave by yourself," I kept murmuring under my breath, holding on to the wheel for dear life.

When I finally reached Rashid's house I was one hour and twenty minutes late.

"Aliya left almost twenty minutes ago," said Rashid's wife, who was getting so big, that she could hardly stand on her feet.

"She said that you were probably busy and that she was worried about dinner. She didn't have enough time to make it and you would come home hungry. She also said she was worried that your father needed to observe his regimen and mother wasn't feeling so

well. I offered her to wait until Rashid got back home so he could drive her, but she said that it was only a thirty minute walk and that she'd like to stretch her legs."

I got into the car and drove home like mad. I had a really bad feeling about this, but I waved it away and concentrated on the road. If Aliya left twenty minutes ago, then she would be close to home by now. The red sun set on the horizon, blinding me, so that I almost drove past a female figure crouched by the side of the road.

At the last moment I managed to slam on brakes, raising a huge cloud of brown dust. The figure on the ground lifted her head. Staring back at me was a tear- and mud-stained face, my sister's face.

"Aliya! What happened?" I rushed to her. She got to her feet and I saw that her lip was swollen and bloody. Her traditional long dress that was supposed to conceal her entire form from the prying eyes of strangers, was torn and dirty, as if she rolled in it on a dusty road. Her hair was an entangled mess, and - oh, horror - in the open for everyone to see, as her black headscarf slipped off her head and was now dangling off her shoulder. Aliya threw herself at me and started crying.

"What happened, Aliya?" I hurriedly covered her hair with the headscarf, while she silently trembled in my arms. I started getting really worried.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" I asked.

"I... I j...just wanted to get d...dinner ready on time," she said quietly.

"Aliya," I looked her straight in the eye. "What happened?"

"D...don't be mad, please, Mohammed. Promise you won't be mad at me?" she looked at me pleadingly.

"I won't, I promise," I said. "Now tell me, what happened to you?"

"I was attacked." She whispered.

"Attacked?! By whom?"

"American soldiers. They drove past in one of those huge, metal things that look like tanks, but are more like trucks."

"You mean a Humvee?"

"Yes." She nodded. "When they saw me, they started whistling and yelling something. Then they stopped. Some of them got out of this hum... hum...dee and tried to get my dress off. I resisted, and one of them started beating me. I pulled at my dress to get it back and that's how it got torn."

"Oh, merciful Allah," I managed to whisper. "Did they do anything to you... Did they... Tell me you are all right."

I held her by the wrists and shook her slightly. "Tell me, tell me!" I repeated.

"You are hurting me," she cried. "It hurts so much."

I released my grip and that's when I noticed that her wrists were all bruised.

Her eyes were full of tears. "I was so scared," she murmured, looking at me pleadingly. "So scared."

"Aliya," I said, my teeth clenched. "Did they violate you?"

She just kept crying, her face buried in her hands.

"Did they violate you?!" I repeated in a dangerous voice.

"Ooohhhh," wailed Aliya.

"Do you know what this means!" Rage filled my brain and colored everything red. I lifted my poor sister by the shoulders and shook her. Her head bounced back and forth.

"Mohammed, you are hurting me," she moaned. "Please, don't hurt me."

I came back to my senses and let her go. All of a sudden I felt incredibly tired.

"What have you done?" I said bitterly. "Why did you have to leave Rashid's house? You should have waited there, as I told you to. And now, look what you've done! Now, no one will ever want you as a wife. No one will even look at you. Our family will live in shame forever!"

Aliya said nothing, but huge tears streamed down her beautiful face.

I sat on the ground and buried my head in my hands. "How will mother survive this?" I said. "And she's been hoping to marry you off to a wealthy man because you are so beautiful! What are we going to do?"

"Mohammed, Mohammed," Aliya gently touched my hand.

"What can you say, Aliya?" I said. "What can you say that will make this right?"

"Mohammed," she said, "I...I just wanted to say that these men wanted to violate me. That was their intention, but...but they didn't."

I did a sharp intake of breath. "They didn't?"

"No," she shook her head. "I was really scared, Mohammed. I was screaming and fighting. These soldiers, they were too strong and they were drunk. But when I thought it was all over for me, another one of those hum...dees arrived."

"Humvees," I corrected her automatically.

"Right." She nodded, and continued quickly, as if she was afraid I wouldn't let her finish. "A man, who looked like an officer, with these angular stripes on his arm, jumped out of it and started yelling at the soldiers. He pulled that foul-breathing man off me. The officer was big, broad-shouldered, and he had blue eyes. I think he ordered the soldiers to get back into their hum...dee. They didn't want to, but he made them and they went away. He helped me to my feet and said something, but I had no idea what he was saying. He said something again, but I just shook my head to show him that I didn't understand. He shrugged his shoulders, got into his hum...dee and drove away. I was alone on the road, but I was in such shock that I couldn't move. I just sat on the curb and cried, until you came."

On the way home, we agreed not to tell anyone what happened. Aliya told mother that she was not feeling well. Late at night, when everyone was asleep, she quietly washed and fixed her clothes, so mother wouldn't notice.

I forbade her to go back to Rashid's house, or even come out of the gate, and from that point on she stayed home. I worked day and night to provide for my family. But however hard I tried, it wasn't enough. We had to cut down on food and forego some of father's medication.

Father was getting worse. Sometimes, I had an impression that he didn't want to live. He started refusing to eat. One day, he came out into the yard and stood there, his haggard face turned toward the sun, his clothes hanging. He stood like that for several minutes, and then, simply collapsed. Aliya rushed to him, but it was too late. He was dead.

After burying my father, mother got ill again. All day long, she would wail and wail. Her chest pains returned. The doctor prescribed her some new and very expensive medication. I did my best to make enough to buy it, but my earnings just weren't enough. Now, with father gone, there really was no reason to keep the Ford. So, I told Abdul that I would sell it to him. Abdul said that he would have enough in a few weeks. Meanwhile, I had to work even harder to make ends meet. I hadn't slept in four days and was starting

to lose weight, despite the fact that Aliya would give me the choicest and largest pieces of meat and would pack me a big lunch every day to work.

I didn't know how much longer I could go on like this and prayed to Allah to show me a better way.

That day as usual I worked late. At midnight I took my last passenger to the airport. After that, I had to stop the car and take a short nap. I woke up from someone knocking on the windshield.

"The Green Zone vicinity," said the man.

I nodded. Close to the Green Zone he paid and got out of the car. I wanted to get another fare or two, but quickly realized that I was so tired that I could fall asleep at the wheel and cause an accident. I looked at the clock. One thirty in the morning. I decided that the best thing to do was to drive home and have a nice night's rest. I opened a window and drove home slowly, inhaling the night air in an attempt to stay awake.

When the clock showed two fifteen a.m. I could already see the gate of my family house ahead. Almost there, I thought with relief. All of a sudden, an ear-splitting whistle pierced the stillness of the night. I scrambled out of the car. The whistle was coming from somewhere right above me. I knew right away, it was a bomb! The bomb that, for some incomprehensible reason, was about to drop on my head. Who would want to target me? I was a nobody. It seemed illogical, yet, judging by the sound, the bomb was about to come down straight on me. Instinctively, I ducked and ran for cover, trying irrationally to shield my head.

In the next moment I heard the explosion. Strangely, it came from somewhere ahead. I looked closer and saw flames coming out of the rubble. I ran the remaining fifty meters, icy chills overtaking my body, despite the warm night.

I stood in front of what used to be my family home, now burning ruins. Neighbors were spilling out of their houses, some carrying water in a vain attempt to stop the fire, others climbing onto the smoldering rubble, looking for signs of life.

"It was that thing Americans call a smart bomb," said one man. "The one they say saves lives."

"Yes, looks like it," said another man. "Remember that time they dropped one of these smart bombs on Khalid's house during his daughter's wedding? Khalid survived by miracle. Americans explained later that they got a tip that the insurgents had a safe house there. What a joke! They killed half of the people at the wedding. His daughter lost her husband and most of her family on her wedding night! And now, she's a cripple and will never be able to bear children."

"So, do you think it was another "tip"?"

"Looks like it." Both men shook their heads and went on fighting the fire and digging out bodies.

I watched my neighbors' efforts paralyzed, not being able to feel my legs, or my hands, or my head. It was as if blood left all my body parts and vital organs and flowed all at once to my heart. My heart kept swelling with all that blood that it couldn't handle, until it was ready to burst. I sat on the ruins, swaying, vaguely registering women's wails and men's attempts to dig out my family.

As the sun rose, I still sat there. A neighbor's wife was talking to me, asking questions. But I was surrounded by some kind of a fog. I was inside the fog and she was on the outside. And I couldn't understand a word she was saying through all that fog.

Finally, she shook her head and left. Another woman came up to me and gave me a jug of milk and a piece of bread. I took both and set them next to me on the ground. A man came and asked something. I shook my head. Whatever his question was, I wasn't interested.

By morning, the neighbors extinguished the fire and dug out mother, Aliya, and one of my brothers. They were still looking for my youngest brother. They lay my family's dead bodies on the ground and went to prepare for a funeral. I knew they would do a good job. I could trust them. Meanwhile, I had other things to take care of.

First, I got to my knees, facing east, and prayed to Allah like I never prayed before. I begged him to take my sacrifice and I begged him for help.

After I was done, I got into my Corolla and drove away. I drove and drove for hours, as if in a dream. When I woke up, I was in front of Abdul's house. I knocked and when Abdul opened up, I said, "I am ready to sell the car."

"I am very happy to hear that," said Abdul. "But I only have three thousand dollars for you right now. In two weeks I can get you another thousand."

"That's fine," I said. "Buy your wife and kids presents instead. Say, they are from me."

"That's very generous," said Abdul. "But I can't accept it. I'll pay you as soon as possible. Your family needs this money."

"Don't worry about it," I assured him, smiling serenely. "My family is fine now, they have everything they need."

Abdul looked at me closely and frowned. "Is everything all right?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

"Why are you acting so strange?" he said. "You negotiated so hard for four thousand, and now you are giving me such a discount. How come?"

"Everything's fine," I said, taking the three thousand. "The car is yours." I gave him a hug. "Good bye, old friend."

Next, I drove to a small café, where I once took a fare. Rumor had it, it was there that you could get real, high quality stuff - you know what I mean... I dropped a couple of names, explained what I wanted and showed the money. I was blindfolded and taken to the back room. From there, a secret door opened and I was led to an underground space that smelled of must and rodents.

Someone, whose face I couldn't see because of my blindfold, asked me why I wanted explosives. I said that I wanted to kill as many Americans as possible, because they killed my family. I told them that I wanted the very best quality. There was silence, then they untied my blindfold and showed me the bomb. They explained how it worked and suggested that the most efficient way to use it was to tie it to the front of the car and use the car as a ram. If the car rams into an American vehicle at high speed, it will cause maximum damage.

I also bought some strong binoculars, paid for everything, and was led out through the back tunnel. I hid the bomb in my car and drove back to what used to be my house. I had just enough money left to buy gasoline and food for a few days. Neighbors came and asked me to stay with them, but I refused. For what I wanted to do, I needed full freedom, besides, if Americans came asking, I didn't want my nice neighbors to end up in Abu Graib. I slept among the ruins of my family home and worked. I drilled several holes in

the hood of the Corolla and attached some strong wires, which were designed to hold the bomb in place. After I was done, I hid the bomb in the ruins, so that no one would find it.

The funeral was the following morning. Women wailed and even men shed tears. My eyes were dry. When the funeral was over, I got into my car and drove away without a second look at my family's graves. They were all in Heaven now, and I would be joining them soon.



But I still had an unfinished business here, on Earth.

I found a good observation point, as close to the gates of the Green Zone as possible, got my binoculars out and watched. After five days of watching, I knew that every morning at eight a convoy, consisting of a large truck, usually full of soldiers, and two or three Humvees, left the Green Zone. Sometimes, additional trucks or cars joined the convoy. As far as I understood, the truck was used to transport soldiers to their posts around the city. I also now knew their route. To minimize the risk of a terrorist attack they kept to major streets, and when they were on the move, they'd stop under no circumstances until they reached their destination. Sometimes, if there was traffic, they'd cross over to the opposite side of the road and keep driving. It was up to the cars to get out of the way and they would just drive over any cars that failed to do so.

But there was something they didn't realize. Baghdad streets had an attached maze of little alleys and narrow medieval passages. I knew this maze very well, having driven people there many times.

In the evening, I circled the target area several times, until I found this alley. It was perfect! Merciful Allah was looking out for me. I asked for his help and I received it.

The alley was usually empty during the day; besides, it wasn't visible from the road. And to top it off, it was uphill from the road, which provided an excellent vantage point. This uphill location was especially valuable since I knew it would add extra speed to my car.

Finally, the day came. I was ready. I parked my trusted Corolla in the alley and tied the bomb to its front. Then, I waited.

If you are reading these words, it means I've succeeded! I am now reunited with my mother, father, brothers, and my beloved sister Aliya.

My only regret is that I haven't had the chance to make my dream come true. But I know, one day it'll happen. One day, the Iraqi desert will be a garden...again.

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I called an emergency strategy meeting with Alejandro. First, I asked him to read Mohammed's letter.

"Do you realize what kind of a story we are holding in our hands?" I asked him as soon as he was finished.

He nodded. "What do you want to do?"

"We need to find out where Mohammed's house is, I mean, used to be."

"How do we do that?"

"We need access to the records of recent smart bomb hits. Unfortunately, Major Armquest, whom I know at the US Army Records Office, values his career too highly. He won't let me see any records. I've already tried."

"Right," said Alejandro.

"But *you* are another story."

"Me? What can I do?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes," I nodded. "I seem to remember you cozying up to that cute, blond private at the bar. I've seen her at the records office. She is one of the data entry clerks. She has access to all the info, while being well under the radar."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to unleash your considerable charms on her. Tell her you are dying to see her, preferably, during her night shift. Tell her you miss her, or something. They only have one person on duty at night, so, she'd be alone in the Records Office."

"What if she refuses?"

"She won't," I said more confidently, than I felt. In truth, I didn't know if the scheme would work, but this was the only way to quickly find out Mohammed's address. "I saw stars in her eyes when she was looking at you," I added, deciding that this was the right moment to stroke his ego.

"That's true," said Alejandro, smiling. "But you must know I am not really interested in her. She was the one who kept clinging to me. I was just being polite."

"I didn't think you *were* interested."

"So, we are just going to use that poor, innocent girl?"

"What choice do we have?"

"True," agreed Alejandro. "All right, show time," he sighed, as if I was making him do something he absolutely hated.

"Yeah, yeah, you just love it," I murmured to his retreating back.

We lucked out. The cute blond's night shift was actually that night. So, Alejandro sent her some flowers and a message that he missed her terribly and that he was leaving the following day on a long assignment. Who knows when he'd be back? As I predicted, the star-struck girl was so eager to see him that she broke about thirty regulations to let him into the US Army Records Office.

Once there, in between whisperings of tender Latin words and passionate kisses, Alejandro expressed fascination with the smart bomb technology. He was especially curious when and where these bombs have been dropped lately and what was their track record.

The blond, feeling very proud that she was privy to things that "the big journalist" had no clue about, showed him in her computer the list of recent hits and explained the target selection process.

"Smart bombs, also known as precision-guided munitions, are designed to minimize collateral damage, while maximizing results. See, all these hits were successful," she said importantly, as if she herself was responsible for them.

"And what's this?" asked Alejandro, pointing at one of the entries that seemed different.

"That was, *regrettably*, a mistake," said the blond, as if she was reading from an army briefing script. "We had credible intel that two high value targets were hiding at that property. But, *regrettably*, there was only a local family."

"Too bad for the Iraqi family. Were they all killed?"

"Yes, they were. I believe one young man survived, because he wasn't there at the time. Everyone else, *regrettably*, was killed." There was that word "regrettably" again. Did the army send them to school to learn these mindless, heartless words, or did it come naturally?

The blond went on briskly, evidently reading from the same invisible script. "The army apologized for their mistake. What are you going to do?" She shrugged her shoulders. "*Regrettably*, these things happen. It was a justifiable loss. Some losses are unavoidable in the war on terror."

"Riiiiiiight..." said Alejandro. At that moment, if I know my cameraman at all, any qualms he might have had about "using that poor, innocent girl" evaporated without a trace. He memorized the address on the screen and left, having made some kind of an excuse.

Early in the morning, we hired an interpreter and drove to Mohammed's house.

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The sad ruin stood silent. The gate had been blown off, so we just walked into the front yard. We stared at the photos of the whole family that someone carefully placed by the ruins, candles burning next to them. An old, white-bearded man; a woman in a burqa - his wife; two young boys; a beautiful girl of no more than sixteen - Aliya. And a young man with intelligent eyes and an open smile... Mohammed.

As Alejandro started rolling his camera, we heard footsteps.

"Go away," said a frowning, bearded Iraqi. "You have no business here, this is private property!" He waived his hands at us, as if trying to chase away evil spirits.

"Please, translate," I said to our translator.

"Are you a neighbor?" I addressed the man.

He nodded. "We buried everybody, the whole family," he said melancholically, pointing at the photos. "You are not welcome here. You must leave."

"We are here because Mohammed wanted us to come," I said.

"Mohammed is dead," said the man.

"I know that," I said. "I witnessed his suicide bombing. But he left me a letter where he told his whole story." I took out Mohammed's letter and showed it to the man. "See?"

"I can't read in English," said the man. "How do I know it's really from him?"

"Trust me," I said. "It is."

The man said nothing, just shook his head and started to leave.

"Look," I made another attempt. "I know what happened here - smart bomb, right? And it was a mistake, right?" The man stopped, then started slowly turning his head. Seizing on my initial success, I pressed on. "Mohammed asked a little boy on the street to give me this letter after his suicide bombing. In it, he described everything that happened to his family, his father's Abu Graib ordeal, his mother's illness, the bombing and..." here I decided to go out on a limb, because I was pretty sure that Aliya's near rape was a secret, "and the fact that his sister, Aliya, was attacked and almost raped by the American soldiers." Now I got his attention.

"Aliya was almost raped by Americans?" he said incredulously. "That explains..."

"Explains what?"

"Nothing," the man shook his head.

"Explains what?" I insisted. "Tell me!"



"Mohammed wouldn't let her out of the gate in the past three weeks. She stepped out once because my wife asked for her help, he saw that and started yelling at her. She had always been Mohammed's favorite. It must have been the first time ever he raised his voice at her. Poor thing was in tears and just ran back inside."

"Look," I said. "I am a journalist. Mohammed gave me this letter because he wanted me to tell his story. I am here to find out more. I really need to talk to you, and perhaps also to your wife, if I may. What kind of a person was he? What was his family like?"

The man began shaking his head again.

"I'll pay you," I added quickly. "I know times are hard, and you probably have children to feed." I took out a wad of American dollars.

The man looked at the money hesitantly. After a pause, he nodded.

"Deal, but you can't film at my house, or use our names and address."

The man's wife brought us refreshments on a tray and joined us after yelling at her six children to stay out of the room. We heard whispers and giggles coming out of the corridor, where the little rascals seemed to be listening in on the conversation.

"Mohammed was always a very studious boy," started the man. "Good head, very good head. Always brought his mother and sister flowers from university. No one understood why he did that. He explained that that's what men did for women in Europe. When we needed a translator, we always went to him. He knew English, and French, and even some German. His dream was to study in Europe. He was a dreamer. Some day, he would say to me, we will grow gardens in Iraq even better than the famous European gardens!"

"What about Aliya?" I asked.

"She was a quiet girl, very pretty," said the woman. "With her looks and a nice, meek character she could marry a wealthy man, bring honor to the family. But when her father became ill after Abu Graib, she had to go to work. She didn't work for long though. One day, Mohammed forbade her to step out of the house on her own. Maybe something happened?"

"She was attacked and nearly raped by American soldiers," explained the man to his wife.

"Ahhh, nooooooo," she started wailing, "ah, that poor, unfortunate family! How many sorrows have they seen! Ooooh, Allah, why did it happen? How could it be?! How many more sorrows can we endure? Why did Allah send us this terrible punishment? What have we done to deserve this plague!"

"Aliya was actually saved by another American, a sergeant, who pulled those soldiers away from her," I said, attempting to get the record straight.

"And how do you know that?" asked the man sarcastically. "Were you at the rape, too?"

"No, I wasn't, but it's all in Mohammed's letter."

The woman kept wailing.

"Quiet, woman!" said the man sharply, but I noticed a glint of something suspiciously wet in his own eye. He pretended to clear his throat. "They were good people. Always helpful, good neighbors. My children played with their boys and we always had..." His chin started trembling, "we had..." He couldn't continue. Instead, he picked up a glass of water from the table and gulped it hard.

"I am afraid there isn't much else we can tell you," he finally said, getting up.

I got up too and handed him the money. "You've been most helpful. Thank you for all your time."

There was silence in the car as we drove back to the Green Zone.

"I need to find out about that sergeant, who was killed in yesterday's bombing," I murmured in response to my own thoughts after we passed the gate. Alejandro nodded.

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"Welcome, Ms. Snow," said a woman in a well-fitting lieutenant's uniform, extending her hand. "I am Jessica Bailes and I'll be your press contact. I've been asked to accompany you through the army compound and to answer any of your questions."

"Thank you," I said. "This is very kind."

"So, how can I help you?"

"I am doing a story on yesterday's suicide bombing and I wanted to learn more about the sergeant, who was killed there. How long has he served in Iraq? What kind of a man was he? What kind of a family did he have? That sort of thing."

"A personal touch," nodded the woman. "I understand."

She opened one of the personnel files on her desk. "Sergeant William O'Shea," she read. "Married, wife Stephanie, son Tyler, five. Family lives in Oklahoma. He had also served in Iraq in 2003. Received multiple commendations and a medal of honor. This was his second tour of duty. Asked to be sent back to Iraq to serve his country. As you can see, a regular American hero. His family can be proud!"

"Right," I said. "This is all very helpful. But can you tell me, what did he like, what were his hobbies, who was he friends with?"

"I am afraid," said Jessica Bailes, "I didn't know him that intimately."

"Can I talk to someone who did?"

"That can be arranged," she nodded. "Please, ask Sergeant Lucas to see me," she said into the intercom.

A minute later, a young man in sergeant's uniform opened the door.

"Sergeant Lucas," said Lieutenant Bailes. "This is Ms. Jade Snow, a journalist from New York. She is doing a piece on yesterday's suicide bombing and she wants to know more about Sergeant O'Shea. Please attend to her needs."

Sergeant Lucas stood hesitantly in the doorway and it was clear as day, at least to me, that he felt extremely awkward.

"Wh... what would you like to know, Ms. Snow?" he said.

"Hello, Sergeant," I got up from my chair and shook his hand. His palm was sweaty. What was he nervous about? Perhaps, it was the forceful way in which Lieutenant Bailes handled the situation? Maybe he knew something? I wondered what he could tell me if we were left alone.

"I wonder, Lieutenant Bailes," I said, "if Sergeant Lucas would be so kind as to show me Sergeant O'Shea's quarters. If you don't mind, of course. To see how an American hero had lived."



"Not at all," said Lieutenant Bailes, smiling. "I think it's a great idea."

"Sergeant, please show Ms. Snow to Sergeant O'Shea's quarters," she commanded regally.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Sergeant Lucas, like a robot.

I gave him an encouraging smile. "I really appreciate your help, Sergeant. It's important for me to talk to someone who knew the real Sergeant O'Shea."

As we walked down the corridor, I got a distinct feeling that he wanted to tell me something.

"This is his room," he said, opening the door.

It was a Spartan place. A neatly made up bed, chair, radio, small desk with a few sheets of paper, a pen and a blank envelope, all ready for writing. But nothing was written on it. Apparently, Sergeant O'Shea never got the chance to start that letter. He never came back that day.

Sergeant Lucas stood right behind me, and again I got the feeling that he really wanted to share something, but didn't have the courage to do it. I needed to figure out how to help him. The important thing was not to scare him off.

"So, you were his close friend?" I started.

"Yes, Ms. Snow," he said briskly. "We both served here in 2003, some of the first on the ground. This was our second tour together."

"I hear he was a good man."

"Yes, he was." Sergeant Lucas nodded briefly and fell silent again.

"You know," I said confidentially, "I was there, at the bombing. I saw it with my own eyes. My cameraman and I were just setting up the camera near the intersection when a shabby Corolla shot out of the alley like a bullet and hit the truck, right where Sergeant O'Shea sat. I want to do this story because I want people to remember the real Sergeant O'Shea."

Sergeant Lucas listened very carefully.

"Would you like to take a look at our little flower garden," he said suddenly. "It's right over there, in the backyard. Sergeant O'Shea and I started it some time ago. He loved flowers."

"Of course," I said. "I'd be very interested!"

He led me to the deserted area of the dusty yard, where in a rare shady spot I saw a tiny patch of green.

"Daisies!" I exclaimed, not believing my eyes. White daisies with yellow centers delicately nodded their heads to me in this kingdom of scorching sun and threatening metal. They seemed so out of place here that I had to touch them to make sure they were real.



"This is the only patch that has enough shade," explained Sergeant Lucas proudly. "It took us a while to find some good dirt. Turns out, daisies can actually grow here if you don't expose them to direct sun."

"You seem to know a lot about gardening," I noted.

"Yes, O'Shea and I both had big gardens back home, in Oklahoma. We both miss... missed them."

"Daisies happen to be my favorite flowers, too," I said. "They are so simple, yet so otherworldly...pure."

Sergeant looked at me like he's just seen me for the first time. "Couldn't have said it better myself. You do have a way with words, Ms. Snow," he said quietly.

"Thank you, Sergeant," I said, again getting a strong feeling that he wanted to tell me something. But what was it? And how could I help him?

All of sudden, he said, "I have something for you."

"Yes?" I said encouragingly.

He reached into his breast pocket and handed me a piece of paper.

"This is the letter O'Shea was writing to his wife the day he was killed. I took it from his desk because I didn't think it was for the military's eyes to see. If they got their hands on it they would've probably destroyed it. And I really wanted Stephanie to get his last piece of Bill's memory. She deserves that much. I didn't want to send it through the regular mail in case they opened it. Thought, maybe I'd send it with someone I trust, or take it to her myself when I get discharged."

I took the letter carefully, as if it was a delicate flower.

"I want you to take it with you," said Sergeant Lucas.

"May I read it?"

"You can read it and use it, if it helps with your story. But I have one request. Please send it to O'Shea's wife as soon as you get back to the States. Promise you'll do that!"

"I promise," I said. "And thank you for trusting me. Don't worry, the letter will be delivered to her."

Sergeant Lucas exhaled, as if a huge load has been lifted off his shoulders.

"I want you to have these," he said. He took out his army knife, chose three of the largest daisies he could find in the tiny flowerbed, and presented them to me solemnly, as if it was a luxurious bouquet.

"Thank you, Sergeant," I said simply. "I love them."

I went back to my hotel room, filled up a vase with water and put the daisies in. I placed the small bouquet in front of me on the coffee table, and sat on the sofa. Then, I opened Sergeant O'Shea's letter.

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My darling Stephanie,

It's been five months now since the start of my second tour in Iraq. I miss you and little Tyler so much! Sometimes I question the wisdom of volunteering for the second tour. Why did I do that? For money? Yes, we do need all the extra cash we can get. The mortgage is expensive, and some day Tyler will need his college tuition. That's one reason. I also wanted to serve my country. But the longer I am here, the more I doubt we should be in Iraq at all. Everything seemed clear in 2003. Saddam is a monster who killed and tortured his own people and who threatened America with weapons of mass destruction.

But the longer I'm here the more confusing it gets. Where are these weapons of mass destruction? They've never found any. And why aren't these people happy we'd liberated them from a tyrant? Daily we hear about attacks on American troops. Our soldiers die every day. Why do they attack us if we brought them democracy and freedom? Don't they want freedom? Maybe democracy isn't their cup of tea? What if we are wrong, what if we aren't liberators? All this makes less and less sense and oftentimes I wish we'd just left this country and never looked back.

Sometimes, I think we, not just the soldiers but the entire American people, were deceived. And sometimes, I think that perhaps the Iraqis have the right to hate us. You'd think that too if you saw what I saw.

It was about three weeks ago. We were on one of our regular patrols when we received a report of a possible insurgent activity targeting Americans. We were dispatched to a remote road on the outskirts of Baghdad and saw a Humvee parked by the curb. We rushed there expecting to defend our people, but instead we found five of our soldiers trying to rape a young Iraqi girl. A couple of them stood around and laughed, the other two held the girl. One was on top of her. They were all drunk.

The girl fought wildly and when she tried to scream one of the soldiers slapped her hard across her face. She gave out this little pitiful yelp and fell silent.



I made my way into that mess and pulled them off of her. I ordered them to leave immediately unless they wanted trouble... so they all got in their Humvee and drove away.

The girl must've been very pretty under normal circumstances, but what a mess she was! When she realized she was finally free she simply collapsed straight on that dusty road, her dress torn, black head scarf askew, hair all entangled and lip bleeding. She covered her head with her hands, trembling all over. I lifted her off the dust and asked if she wanted a ride home.

"Where d'you live? Where can I take you?" I kept asking. But all she did was shake her head like mad and try to wiggle out of my arms.

I finally left her alone because it appeared that's what she wanted, and we drove away. There were no insurgents in sight so we drove back to the city. Who placed that call about insurgent activity? It was a mystery but a good thing they did, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to save that poor girl.

Her face haunts me at night. I've been debating with myself whether to report those servicemen. In the end, Lucas talked me into forgetting the whole incident. I did nothing, but I am not likely to forget.

Goodbye, my darling Stephanie.

I miss you terribly. Till next letter,

Your loving husband, Bill.

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I put down the letter and stared at the daisies. Bill O'Shea was *the sergeant* who rescued Aliya from the rape. He was the one!

I got up and dressed. I took my bag, the Jeep keys, wrapped the three daisies in a white linen napkin and locked the door. I got into the Jeep and drove to the suicide bombing's site. The remnants of the tragedy have been dragged to the curb, and yet one more ugly pile of burned and broken metal was added to the many other such piles scattered around this long-suffering city. Traffic resumed on this busy road, as if nothing happened. The marketplace nearby was again abuzz with people, vendors selling their produce, families shopping, children crying. Life went on.

I stopped the car, took the three daisies and headed to the scorched metal pile, a sad monument to the recent tragedy. I placed my little bouquet on top of it. Pure and beautiful, the daisies were a staggering contrast with the blackened metal. They simply didn't belong here.

"To Mohammed, to Aliya and to Bill O'Shea," I whispered, touching each of the three daisies in turn. "One day, the desert will be a garden... again."

Then, I turned around and drove back to the Green Zone.



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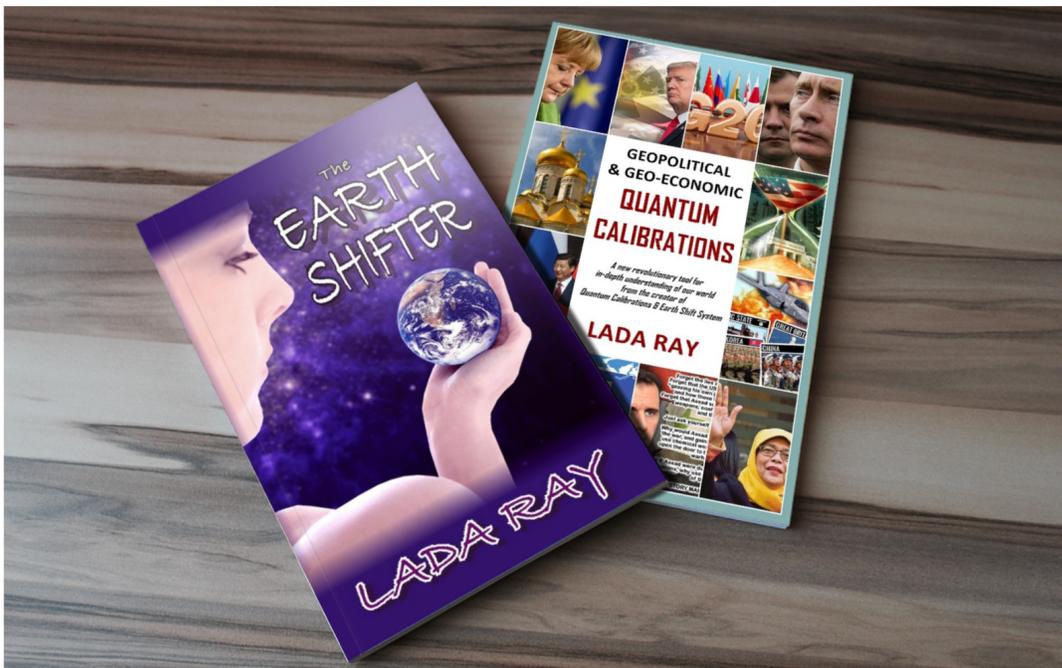
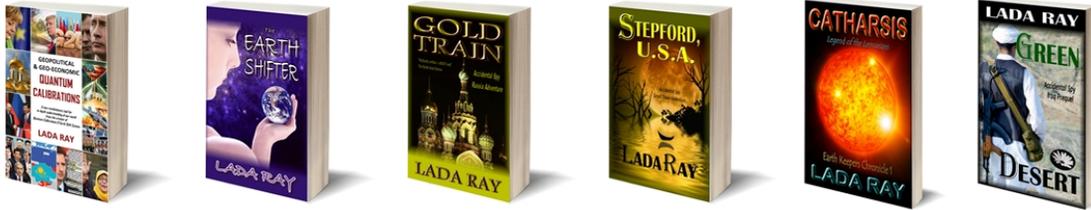
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