



DIRECTED VERDICT

"[SINGER] IS EVERY BIT AS ENJOYABLE AS JOHN GRISHAM."
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY—

RANDY SINGER



DIRECTED
VERDICT

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RANDY
SINGER

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BOOKLIST

on *By Reason of Insanity*

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Directed Verdict

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First printing by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., in 2009.

Previously published as *Directed Verdict* by WaterBrook Press under ISBN-10: 1-57856-633-9.

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, www.alivecommunications.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Singer, Randy (Randy D.)

Directed verdict / Randy Singer.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-3154-6 (sc)

1. Persecution—Saudi Arabia—Fiction. 2. Missionaries' spouses—Fiction. 3. Actions and defenses—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.I5725D47 2009

813'.6—dc22 2008053387

Build: 2014-02-28 12:43:45

*For Rhonda, Roz, and Josh.
You're the best. Ever.*

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PART I
PERSECUTION

“SARAH, THE MUTTAWA FOUND US! They’re coming. Maybe tonight.” The caller paused, his voice trembling. “Arrests. Interrogations. Executions. They’ll stop at nothing,” he whispered rapidly in Arabic.

Sarah tried to answer, but the words stuck in her throat. She clenched the receiver so tight her knuckles turned white. She was suddenly out of breath, yet she knew she could not allow the man on the other end of the line to sense her fear.

“Sarah, are you there?”

“Is this Rasheed?” she asked in her own low murmur. She too spoke in Arabic.

“You must cancel the services tonight. And, Sarah?”

“Yes?”

“Get the kids out of the apartment.”

The kids. Twelve-year-old Meredith. Ten-year-old Steven. Of course she would find a place for the kids. But what about her . . . and Charles? They couldn’t just run and hide at the first hint of an investigation. But if this were not a false alarm . . .

“Sarah? Remember, we are not given a spirit of fear but of power and love and a sound mind.”

“Um, okay . . . we’ll be all right.” As she spoke her voice grew steadier, but she still whispered. “Pray for us.”

“I will,” he promised, and the line went dead.

Sarah kept the phone against her ear, not yet ready to hang up and face Charles and the kids. A million questions screamed for answers. It was Rasheed’s voice, but how could he possibly know about the Muttawa? And if they were coming tonight, what did they know? Who told them? And why? She tried to gather her thoughts, calm her fears, stop the spinning sensation in her head. She lowered the phone and stared down at it.

“Is everything all right, hon?” Charles asked. He crossed the kitchen and began massaging her shoulders. She closed her eyes and felt his fingers penetrate the knotted muscles. They did not relax. “Hey,” he said gently. “What’s got you so tight?”

Sarah turned and let Charles embrace her. She trembled in his arms, then stood on her toes and whispered in his ear. “The Muttawa have found us. They may be coming tonight.”

Tilting her head to look at him, she searched his eyes for the comfort and strength she had found on so many occasions during their twenty-three years of marriage.

Instead, she saw nothing but terror.

* * *

There were few empty seats in the cavernous courtroom, and the marshals were on full alert. The middle aisle divided the spectators into two camps. They had nothing in common.

The left side, behind the prosecutor's table, was jammed with the local defenders of a woman's right to choose. Employees of the Norfolk Medical Clinic were there, as were leading pro-choice advocates from across Virginia. Joining them, so as not to be associated with the fanatics on the other side, were court personnel who had taken time off to see the defendant get what he deserved.

The other side of the courtroom—the right side—was populated with members of Chesapeake Community Church. Many kept their heads bowed in silent prayer as their pastor, the Reverend Jacob Bailey, came to a critical point in his testimony. The church members were joined by some hard-core veterans of the pro-life movement, men and women who had served time for chaining themselves to each other or to abortion clinics. They had seen some irate judges and pit-bull prosecutors in their day. But, as they eagerly told any reporter who would listen, they had never seen a judge as biased as this one—the Honorable Cynthia Baker-Kline. And in this case, with no jury, she had the sole power to convict or acquit.

Two sketch artists, drawing fast and furiously, sat with the reporters on the left side of the courtroom. The woman wearing the robe was easy, a sketch artist's dream. Behind her back, the lawyers called her Ichabod Crane. She had angular features—a long pointed nose, wire-rimmed glasses, accusatory bony fingers, a perpetual scowl, and a jutting jaw—the quintessential schoolmistress. She had not smiled the entire case.

The Reverend Jacob Bailey would prove more difficult for the artists. Try as they might, neither had succeeded in making the defendant look like a criminal. His face was thin and pale. Twenty days of a fluids-only fast had rendered him gaunt. Static electricity charged his wispy and unmindful blond hair, and he slumped forward as he testified, his bony frame engulfed by the witness chair. He talked so softly that Ichabod had to keep reminding him to speak into the mike.

The man presently questioning Bailey was defense attorney Brad Carson. He fared better with the artists. He was thin, possessing a runner's build, a chiseled jaw, deep-set and expressive steel blue eyes, and jet-black hair. He had the comfortable bearing of a man without pretense and a quick and easy smile that charmed both witnesses and spectators.

The artists put down their pencils as Carson got to the crux of the matter.

"What were you doing outside the abortion clinic on September 13, Reverend?" Brad addressed the witness from behind the podium. Yesterday his efforts to pace the courtroom had generated a stern lecture from Ichabod on proper decorum.

"Praying," the reverend said, softly and simply.

"Were you talking to God or talking to men?"

"I pray to God," the reverend answered, "in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ."

Brad had not put that last part in the script, and he shot Bailey a reproving look. "Did you have your eyes closed as you knelt to pray?" Brad emphasized that the reverend was on his knees; it would make his conduct seem less threatening.

"Yes, of course."

"Did you even know whether anybody else was around?"

"Not really," the reverend said. "When I pray, I try to focus on God and block out everything else."

Another bonus answer. Brad got the impression that the pastor was juicing it up a little for the congregation.

“Were you within one hundred feet of the clinic?” Ichabod asked sharply, leaning forward so she hovered over the witness.

Her question, though an easy one, seemed to startle the witness. He looked up meekly at the judge. “Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Brad watched Ichabod make a check on the legal pad in front of her. The criminal statute applied to any speech or activities within one hundred feet of a medical facility.

He moved quickly to regain the initiative. “May I approach the witness, Your Honor?” Brad started walking toward the witness box.

Ichabod glared at Brad and waited a few painful seconds. He stopped. “Yes,” she said, when she had his full attention. Brad sighed and moved forward. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Ichabod return to doodling on her legal pad, doing her best to look bored.

“I’m handing you a copy of the criminal statute in question,” Brad said as he extended a single sheet of paper to the reverend. The paper trembled as Bailey held it. Brad knew this would happen. It was part of his plan to generate sympathy.

“Look down at the second paragraph,” Brad continued, moving back to his own counsel table and pulling a pair of reading glasses from his suit coat pocket, “and follow with me as I briefly read the things this statute prohibits. Did you try to obstruct, detain, or hinder anyone from entering the facility?”

“No.”

“Did you knowingly come within eight feet of any patients for the purpose of passing out a leaflet or handbill?”

“No.”

“Did you knowingly come within eight feet of any patients for the purpose of engaging in oral protests or persuading the patients not to proceed with an abortion?”

“No,” the Reverend Bailey said, his voice picking up some confidence even as his hand continued to tremble. Brad was pleased with the witness; it had not been easy to convince the pastor to answer so succinctly.

But Ichabod was not through.

“When you pray,” she asked, looking thoughtfully out toward the audience, “does your religion require that you pray at a certain spot?”

“No, Your Honor,” Bailey admitted, looking befuddled.

“So you can pray anywhere in the country, and God will still hear?”

“Yes, of course. He’s omnipresent.”

“And can your God hear you whether you pray out loud or to yourself?” the judge asked, still staring off into the distance.

“Sure,” Bailey said. He had leaned too close to the mike, and it squealed. He jumped back as if it had bitten him.

“On the date in question, were you praying out loud or to yourself?” Ichabod queried.

“Out loud.”

“Loud enough for others to hear?”

“Yes.”

Ichabod made a few more check marks on her pad. Then she turned and gave the witness an icy stare. He shifted uncomfortably.

Brad felt like he was watching a train wreck develop in slow motion and was powerless to stop it. He took off his glasses and began gnawing on them.

“Then do you expect this court to believe that you just *happened* to pick this spot to pray and just *happened* to pray out loud, but really had no intention of persuading the women who might just *happen* to walk by?” Ichabod raised her inflection and eyebrows in a show of disbelief.

“Your Honor,” Brad said quickly, drawing attention away from the witness box. “I find myself in the unusual position of objecting to the court’s own questions.” He flashed a disarming grin that the judge did not return.

“While I’ve got a suspicion that my objection will be overruled,” he continued, “it does seem improper for you to be asking argumentative questions of this witness. Particularly when the question implies that this statute prevents someone from praying out loud on a public sidewalk. My reading of the statute does not suggest that interpretation.”

“Is that your objection?” Ichabod turned her icy stare to Brad.

“For now,” he added quickly.

“Overruled. The court is entitled to develop a full record. Now, Mr. Bailey, answer the question.”

Reverend Bailey hesitated and exhaled deeply. “Honestly, Your Honor,” he said in a soft-spoken plea, “I felt burdened to pray about this.” He paused and looked down at his folded hands, his voice softening even further. “This sin that is plaguing our nation . . . this killing of unborn children. And I felt led by God to do so in front of the clinic, regardless of the consequences.”

Attaboy, Brad thought. *Show a little spine*. Brad jumped on the chance to regain control.

“Why did you feel so burdened?” he asked, leaning forward, feigning interest.

The question elicited a quick response from the prosecuting attorney, a severe-looking woman in her midforties named Angela Bennett, who rose immediately to object. She could have saved her energy, because Ichabod, the self-appointed guardian of the Norfolk Clinic, was all over this one.

“Mr. Carson,” Ichabod hissed, staring at him over the glasses perched on the end of her nose, “the question’s improper, and you know it. I’ve told you before, we are not going to get into the reverend’s personal views on abortion—”

“But, Judge, motivation is key. The statute requires that Reverend Bailey intentionally come within eight feet of abortion patients for the *purpose* of persuading them not to—” The judge held up her hand and Brad stopped in midsentence.

“Mr. Carson!” she snapped. “I am not finished!”

“Sorry, Your Honor,” Brad said, without the least hint of remorse.

“You *will not* inject the issue of motivation into this case. This is basically a trespass case. He either violated the law, or he didn’t. His purpose for being there—and whether it was to persuade women not to have an abortion—can be determined from his actions. His motivation for being there does not concern me. Is that clear?” She gave Brad her most intense federal judge stare.

He wanted to tell her she was splitting legal hairs, that she was a disgrace to the bench. He wanted

to tell her off the way he had in his dreams, the way he had while driving to work, the way he had a thousand times this morning in his own mind. He felt the heat rising in his neck, and he knew how good it would feel to unload. But he also knew it would be pointless.

His plan called for a far different approach. And his client's future hinged on Brad's ability to keep his cool and execute the plan.

So he just glared back, his eyes flashing with equal intensity.

"Mr. Carson, I'm speaking to you," Ichabod said, her voice nearly cracking.

"Sorry, Judge," he replied at last. "I just wanted to make sure you were finished this time."

His impertinence caught her speechless. Her eyes were mere slits, with the nostrils on her enormous nose puffing in and out. When she finally did speak, it came in short, staccato bursts.

"Don't you ever . . . treat this court with such disrespect again! Next time . . . I'll hold you in contempt. And, Mr. Carson?"

He raised an eyebrow, determined not to speak.

"Get back behind that podium and resume your examination from there." She watched warily as Brad retreated to the podium. "Your juvenile shenanigans do not impress me."

Brad shuffled his notes on the podium, then leaned down to whisper in the ear of the heavyset woman seated at the counsel table, his longtime assistant, Bella Harper.

"Watch that vein on her neck," Brad whispered. "I'm going to make it explode." Even as he spoke the prominent vein on the right side of Ichabod's neck was pulsing visibly, in and out with every heartbeat.

"Don't be a hero," Bella whispered.

But Brad realized he no longer had a choice. He could not win this case in front of Ichabod. She had already made up her mind and would not be confused by the facts. His best chance now was to demonstrate her bias and set her up for reversal on appeal.

To do so, he would have to provoke the full fury of the judge and put his own reputation at risk—reputation that had taken twelve years to build. It would make matters unbearable at trial but give him a shot on appeal. As an unpleasant by-product, it would make him the poster boy for the Christian Right, a martyr for a cause he did not embrace.

He would do it anyway.

He would do it because he had taken an oath to represent his clients zealously. He would do it because it was the right thing to do.

Brad paused for air and braced himself. Ichabod had not heard the last about motivation.

It was time for Plan B.

* * *

On the other side of the world, a warrior stalked his prey.

Ahmed Aberijan was a holy warrior, and he was in a holy war. His official title was director of the Muttawa, the Saudi Arabian religious police. His colleagues called him the Right Hand of Mohammed.

His agency was the last bastion of religious purity in a society ravaged by the cancer of Western

culture. For Ahmed, Islamic law was all that separated his country from the degradation of the West. Without it, Saudi Arabia would become America's puppet, its Arab slave. America sickened him—the haughty women, the crass materialism, the arrogance of the weak Western politicians. He had secretly gloated when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center collapsed, watching with pleasure as radical Muslims danced in the streets. Like the infidels in the trade towers, all Christians would one day face the fierce wrath of Allah and answer for their transgressions.

In the meantime, they would have to deal with him.

He lived for nights like this one; he could feel the blood racing through his veins, each nerve-ending fully alert. His target was the underground house church of an American missionary named Charles Reed. But his ultimate goal, as always, was purity for the people of the Kingdom.

Prophet Mohammed himself—peace be upon him—had declared that there should be no religion but Islam on the Arabian peninsula. It was holy ground. Sacred. Not to be desecrated by Western infidels.

For that reason, non-Islamic sects were prohibited from holding public meetings or worshipping. And converting from Islam to another religion was still punishable by death.

A young Ahmed had cringed when the Muttawa enforced religious purity with unfeeling brutality, torture, even beheadings. But as he grew in strength and fervor, Ahmed began to understand that advancing the cause of the Great Prophet sometimes required the shedding of blood. He still remembered the first time he had personally exacted revenge for Allah. He was overwhelmed with a euphoric sense of passion and peace. He experienced, like never before, Allah's pleasure. And that day, he dedicated his life to advancing the cause and punishing the infidels.

Tonight, that mission required Ahmed's presence on the other side of town at a run-down apartment complex. Though he could easily have done so, he never dreamed of delegating this task, or sending someone else to do the hard work for Mohammed. And as his caravan sped through the dark side streets of Riyadh, he sat alone in the backseat of the first unmarked car, interior lights on, reviewing the file and savoring his plan.

The Reed file was thin, the information sparse. Page one contained the summary. Dr. Reed's official occupation in Saudi Arabia, as listed on his visa application, was that of a private school teacher. His wife, Sarah, posed as a school administrator. But Ahmed knew the Reeds were, in fact, American missionaries, sent to deceive and proselytize the Muslim people.

According to his source, a loyal Muslim who had feigned conversion and joined the Reeds' church, the combination of Dr. Reed's passionate teaching and his wife's administrative skills had proven effective in leading more than a few Muslims astray. Tonight he would put an end to their crimes.

Page two of the Reed file contained the affidavit from the source. The Reeds and their followers crammed themselves into the stuffy family room of the Reeds' apartment every Friday night at seven o'clock, the source said, forming one of Riyadh's fastest-growing underground churches. The Reeds were passionate about converting those who attended and equally passionate about the secrecy of the service, which lasted about two hours.

But it wasn't the Friday night service that bothered Ahmed. The names and addresses of those worshipers could be—in fact had been—acquired from his informant. One small church gathering did not merit a minute of Ahmed's valuable time. But the affidavit alleged that the Reeds were also the

catalysts for a network of underground churches. They would pray for these other churches on Friday night. Some were led by the Reeds and worshiped at other places. Some were led by other pastors who were in turn mentored by Reed. They never used names, and the informant did not know the leaders or locations of these churches.

But Reed knew. And if he cared about his wife and children, tonight Reed would tell.

Ahmed stared at the passport photos of the couple. The years of pastoring had not been kind to Charles Reed. Ahmed smirked at the pale and pockmarked skin of the pudgy American, the thick glasses, the receding hair, the deep wrinkles that spread like vines from the American's eyes. He would be easy prey. Soft. Pliable.

Sarah Reed had aged more gracefully. Her short, wavy blonde hair framed a face of gentle lines and smooth skin. High cheekbones complemented deep blue eyes that glistened with life even in the photograph. Ahmed was surprised that Sarah Reed made no effort to accentuate those features with the detestable makeup or jewelry of the West. Her looks communicated a natural and comfortable warmth, a woman who would become an immediate friend and confidante to the unsuspecting Muslims she was leading into heresy.

He was sure, just from looking at the photographs, that Charles Reed would love his wife deeply and do anything to protect her. He was also sure that the men he had brought for this raid, with their lust for subjugating Western women, would give Charles Reed sufficient cause for concern.

* * *

Hours after the phone call, Sarah was beginning to think it was a false alarm.

Shaken by the call, she had first suggested leaving.

"Where would we go?" Charles asked. "Who would we stay with and place in danger?"

Sarah looked down and did not respond.

"Sooner or later, if we're going to stay in this country and reach these people, we'll have to face them," Charles said softly.

Without another word, Sarah picked up the phone and started making calls. She called some trusted friends to take care of the kids. She called every family in the church, explaining the situation, telling them the service was canceled, and asking them for their prayers. Only three members of the church were not home, and though it was against every rule of the fledgling underground movement, she left a vague warning on their answering machines.

When Meredith and Steven were safely out of the house, Sarah and Charles went about the job of sanitizing the apartment of all things religious. Charles started on the computer. He deleted Bible software programs, e-mails, files, and backup files. He transferred lists of church members to flash drives.

Sarah collected all the CDs, Bibles, song sheets, address lists, and papers from the mission board and put them in two large green garbage bags. She even took down the refrigerator magnets with the Bible verses on them. She wrapped the bags in a second bag for safekeeping, then carried them outside.

The Reeds' apartment building was in a forgotten part of the bustling city of Riyadh. It housed

hundreds of residents, mostly foreign nationals, in look-alike apartment boxes distinguished only by the apartment number. The place smelled like stale urine. The apartments had not seen a fresh coat of paint in many years, and the Dumpsters in the parking lot were overflowing. Ignoring the full bins, Sarah walked past them and carried her heavy trash bags to a Dumpster in a complex three blocks away.

By the time they were done with their “spring-cleaning,” the apartment could just as well have belonged to a couple of atheists.

It was time to pray. And for the next few hours, Charles and Sarah sat beside each other and talked—to each other and to God. “Lord,” Charles said quietly as he held Sarah’s hand at the kitchen table, “if it be Your will, deliver us from the Muttawa and keep us safe. But if it is Your will that we suffer, give us the same power and courage through the Holy Spirit that You gave to the apostle Paul. And give us the grace that allowed Paul to say he counted it a joy to suffer for Your name’s sake. Above all else, put a hedge of protection around Meredith and Steven and keep them safe.”

Charles squeezed Sarah’s hand. She squeezed back.

“In the name of Jesus, amen.”

Sarah stood to survey the apartment one more time. It was getting late. Maybe they wouldn’t come. It was nearly eight o’clock. Maybe the Lord had already answered their prayers.

She looked at Charles and forced a small smile. He was trying to act calm, but Sarah had felt the sweat on his palms as they prayed, and the look of terror had never left the depths of his eyes.

As she stood, she jammed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. Then she felt it. Her prayer card. The daily list that reminded her to pray every time her fingers reached into her pocket. She smiled at the way the Lord had just reminded her to get rid of it. She had gone over the house with a fine-toothed comb and totally forgotten about the list in her own pocket.

She pulled it out to read the names one last time as she headed for the door. It would go in the trash bin with the other stuff. But first, she would try to remember. *Pray for salvation, the list read, for Hanif and for Khartoum, who has attended, but never—*

She stopped reading midsentence and froze midstep. A noise—maybe a shuffling—from the landing outside her door. Her eyes darted over to Charles, who put his index finger to his lips. She reached inside her blouse and stuffed the list in her bra. Another noise, muffled words . . .

* * *

By 8:02, Ahmed and his thugs had crept up the stairs and assembled outside Apartment 3C. He gave his orders in low and hoarse Arabic.

In the next instant, he and his men crashed through the wooden door of the apartment and unleashed the fury of Mohammed on Sarah and Charles Reed.

FOR SARAH, EVENTS BECAME A BLUR, jumbled images on a screen that changed so quickly the eye could not focus.

Without knocking, two large Muttawa agents blasted through the wooden door, destroying the dead bolt and shattering the door itself. Two others quickly followed, guns drawn, orders flying in Arabic.

An older man entered next, walking quickly through the splintered door, clearly in charge, his eyes blazing as he assessed the apartment. He was not a tall man, but he had a linebacker's build with a dark complexion and a darker scowl. Deep wrinkles creased his leathery face, and a thin and wiry beard covered his chin. His penetrating eyes stared straight through Sarah until she diverted her gaze.

The man unleashed a vicious stream of Arabic curses. Sarah couldn't catch it all, but she got the gist. He expected a worship service. He had been double-crossed. They would pay. The traitors would die.

The other men began moving toward her and Charles.

Sarah instinctively backed away toward the family room adjoining the kitchen, her empty hands raised over her head. She glanced at Charles, who still stood at the kitchen table, frozen in time. He had placed his own hands behind his head, like they did in the movies. His countenance quickly changed from consternation to calm, and he shot Sarah an almost imperceptible nod. For some reason the terror was gone. His reassuring look calmed Sarah.

A slender agent with small, dark slits for eyes and a scar that ran down his left cheek began shouting orders in English at the Reeds. "Hands on your head! Spread your legs and face the wall!"

Sarah immediately turned to face a wall in the family room, craning her neck slightly sideways toward the kitchen table and Charles. He was slower to move, and she saw another man jam a forearm into Charles's back and slam him into the wall. His nose hit hard, and blood started trickling to the floor. Charles kept his hands on his head, with the agent standing right behind him, fists clenching and unclenching.

Sarah took a quick look over her shoulder at the apparent leader. His hooded eyes were red and wild with emotion, like a badly developed photograph. Though she immediately diverted her gaze back to the wall, she knew those eyes had been etched into her memory forever, tattooed as a grim reminder of this horrible night.

She wished she had never looked.

She could sense the man moving slowly and purposefully behind her. Within seconds, she smelled the stale breath coming from over her shoulder and felt the callused hand squeeze the base of her skull. He exerted pressure, and the pain shot through her head. She wanted to scream but could only whimper.

“Do not defy me,” he whispered hoarsely. “Do not look me in the eye.” The other men in the apartment stopped moving. Sarah heard nothing but the man’s heavy breathing in her ear.

He closed the vise again between his finger and thumb. Her knees buckled from the pain, and she groaned pitifully in submission. He released his grip and took one step back.

Sarah took an uneven breath and let out a slow groan. She tried to focus on standing, leaning heavily against the wall. The room spun, and the throbbing at the base of her neck would not let up.

She would not look at them again.

Someone began to pronounce the charges. Perhaps the man with the scar; the broken English sounded like his.

“We have reason to understand you are leaders in a criminal—how do you say?—plan or conspiracy,” he announced. “We have reason to know you sell cocaine through a group of people who uh, pretense to act like church. We have papers of arrest and search.”

“Let me see your credentials.” Sarah heard fear in Charles’s words. His voice, an octave higher than normal, sounded more like a whimper than a command. But he bravely stammered on. “These charges are ridiculous.”

A sickening thud caused Sarah to glance at the kitchen. Charles’s face and bloodied nose had been crushed against the wall, his glasses knocked to the floor. Charles moaned in pain as a thick agent ground the glasses with his heel and pressed Charles’s face harder into the wall. The blow had opened a gash above Charles’s left eye, and more blood trickled down his face and splattered on the floor.

Sarah shrieked at the sight of the blood; then she stopped abruptly when the barrel of a gun touched the back of her own neck. She began to shake and quietly sob. She closed her eyes to erase the images. But all she saw in the darkness was the face of Charles covered in blood. And the vicious eyes of the Muttawa leader.

In the next few moments, the men began ransacking the apartment. Sarah tried to fight off the pain and fear, her slender body convulsing silently as she sobbed. She kept her eyes closed as she listened to the agents move from room to room, dismantling, destroying, searching.

She prayed for courage.

A commotion in the bedroom indicated they had found something. The men huddled briefly in the hallway and then began turning the rest of the apartment upside down with renewed vigor. The man behind Sarah jammed the gun harder against her skull, a warning not lost on her, and then pulled it away as he joined the others in the search. Sarah finally mustered the courage to look discreetly over her shoulder as the men attacked the family room. Her heart skipped a beat as the agents cut open the cushions of the couch and withdrew packages filled with a powdery white substance.

We’ve been set up, she realized. What now?

The search complete, the small apartment looked like a war zone. The agents marked and stacked the plastic bags neatly on the family room coffee table.

“Ahmed!” The agent with the scar called to the leader and pointed to the stack. “Ten kilos,” he said with a cruel smile.

Sarah questioned Charles with her eyes, the silent language that flows from years of marriage.

What do we do?

Peace continued to fill his steady gaze, a coming to terms with the reality of being persecuted for

his faith. His composure was her strength, and for a moment she believed they would actually be all right.

The man called Ahmed dished out more orders, and the agents jumped into action again. They turned a kitchen chair to face the family room, threw Charles into it, then wrenched his arms behind him. Ahmed leaned over in front of Charles, his face inches away.

“We find ten kilos of coke,” Ahmed bragged. “You will soon be famous drug king. But you are also an American missionary—yes?”

Charles Reed did not speak. He locked his eyes on the floor.

“Do not ignore me!” Ahmed demanded. He grabbed Charles’s hair and jerked his face upward. “Look . . . at . . . me,” he growled.

Charles narrowed his bloodied eyes and glared back. Defiance filled his look in a way that Sarah had never seen.

“I want names and addresses of other church leaders.” Ahmed spoke in a low and gruff voice.

Without thinking, Sarah slowly started shaking her head from side to side. Her husband could no longer see her, his view blocked by the bulky body of his interrogator. But Sarah willed her husband to defy this evil man. *Just hang tough*, she pleaded silently. *Don’t give even one name!*

“I see,” Ahmed snarled as he let go of the hair and watched Charles resume his stare at the floor. “You make this difficult.”

He turned to the agents in the family room. “Continue the search,” he commanded in Arabic, but this time he gave the orders slowly, enunciating the words carefully so the Reeds could comprehend. “Remove the woman’s clothes and search her for drugs, every hiding place on her body. Enjoy yourselves.”

Sarah went numb.

As if fueled by his wife’s fear, Charles reacted with the desperate impulse of a man who had nothing to lose. He jumped from the chair and shook off one agent just as Ahmed turned again to face him. Charles lowered his head and drove himself forward. He landed a perfect head butt, driving his forehead as a battering ram into Ahmed’s chin.

Ahmed reeled backward, spitting blood, but quickly regained his footing. With the fluid motion of a martial arts expert, he spun and landed his foot squarely against the side of Charles’s face, the sound of cracking bone a testament to the blow’s force. Charles’s head snapped to the side, and his body hurtled against the kitchen wall, collapsing helplessly on the floor.

Sarah dropped her face into her hands and screamed.

A large agent instantly jerked her around and clamped his hand over her mouth. She bit. Hard. And she brought up her knee with all her might. He yanked his hand back, doubled over, and cursed.

But now two more agents were up against her, pinning her to the wall, stuffing her mouth with some type of cloth. Her small frame was no match for these men. They were in her face, pinning her arms and legs. Then they went after her clothes with a vengeance, ripping open her cotton blouse, gawking and grinning stupidly.

The prayer list, she remembered. *They’ll see the prayer list!*

This thought energized Sarah, and with an adrenaline-fueled explosion she slipped away from one assailant and lunged at the other. He barely averted her wild swings, wrapped her in a bear hug, and

threw her backward to the floor, landing squarely on top of her. Her neck snapped back, and her head bounced hard on the thin carpet.

Everything went black.

* * *

Brad checked his notes and his nerve one more time. Ichabod would never let the witness answer the questions, but still he had to ask. When you try a case with one eye on the appeals court, you have to preserve the record. Make the judge rule. Demonstrate her bias.

“Do you believe that human life begins at conception?” Brad bluntly asked Reverend Bailey.

“Objection.”

“Sustained,” Ichabod ruled. “That question ought to be taken out and shot.”

“Do you have a basis in the Bible for your belief that human life begins at conception?” Brad persisted.

“Objection, Judge,” prosecutor Angela Bennett whined. “That question assumes that the witness answered the prior question, which he didn’t.”

“Sustained,” Ichabod snapped. “Mr. Carson, move on to something relevant.”

“Do you believe abortion is murder?”

Bennett stood but had no time to object. “Mr. Carson—” Ichabod’s voice had a hard edge—“do you understand English? The reverend’s personal beliefs about abortion are not relevant. *Not relevant*. Now move on to something that is or sit down so the witness may be cross-examined.”

“May I at least explain the basis for asking the questions?” Brad asked, a trace of sarcasm in his words.

“No.”

Bennett smirked and sat down.

Brad’s eyes locked on Ichabod as he planned his next line of attack. His next question dripped slowly from his mouth, but he kept his stare fixed on the judge, daring her to rule the question out of order. “The statute requires that you purposefully try to persuade a woman not to enter the clinic and have an abortion,” Brad explained. “What was your *purpose* in praying on the sidewalk in front of the clinic?”

Ichabod frowned but did not speak.

“To petition God for mercy,” the reverend said.

Brad returned his attention to the witness. The man looked paler and more fragile than ever. “And why did you choose to have this prayer meeting in front of the abortion clinic?”

“Because that’s where the evil was happening,” the reverend said softly.

“Speak up,” Ichabod demanded, “and move closer to the microphone.”

“Because that’s where the evil was happening,” the Reverend Bailey repeated. “That’s where the babies were dying.”

“Is the front of the abortion clinic the only place you have conducted this type of prayer meeting?” Brad asked.

The prosecutor was on her feet, but her objection was forestalled by a quick look from Ichabod.

“Don’t bother,” the judge said testily. “Don’t bother objecting, because I’m going to let it in. I’m going to give Mr. Carson all the rope he needs to hang himself.”

Bennett shrugged and sat down.

“No, it’s not,” the reverend said, leaning into the mike.

“It’s not what?” Brad asked.

“It’s not the only place we have petitioned God for mercy and to halt evil. My congregation and I have prayed over the last few years in front of our local pharmacy when they started dispensing the RU-486 pill, and in front of some of the bars down on Military Highway, and, you know, places like that . . .” His voice trailed off, and he leaned back from the mike.

Brad gave him a sideways look of reproach. “Any other places you can think of . . . where you have petitioned God to end some perceived evil?”

“How can this be relevant?” a frustrated Angela Bennett asked.

“Because it shows the Reverend Bailey didn’t go to the abortion clinic with the purpose of persuading pregnant women as prohibited by the statute,” Brad answered. “His purpose was to petition God, and that’s not prohibited. And it shows he has prayed with his congregation at other places where he perceives evil influences exist, also for the purpose of petitioning God. In short, it demonstrates a pattern.”

Brad looked at the judge and waited for her ruling. He knew she didn’t like this line of questioning, but neither did she like getting reversed on appeal for making bad evidentiary rulings.

“Go on,” Ichabod said, without hiding her impatience. “Is there anyplace else you have done this prayer meeting thing?”

“Just one other place,” the Reverend Bailey said meekly. He paused. The entire courtroom waited.

“The steps of this courthouse.”

“That’s ridiculous,” the prosecutor said sharply.

“I agree,” Ichabod barked. “The remark will be struck from the record.”

Her face flushed and the vein pulsed.

She had taken the bait.

CHARLES REED TRIED TO FOCUS. His mind swirled in a rage of anger, pain, and helplessness. Two muscular agents forced him into the kitchen chair again and pinned his arms behind his back. Ahmed was in his face. Sarah lay motionless on the family room couch.

She was alive, he knew. And by the grace of God, she had not been molested. After she blacked out, Ahmed started barking orders. Check the pulse. Lay her on the couch. Grab that list from her bra. Leave her alone.

Charles did not know the reason for the last order. Maybe they were waiting for her to regain consciousness. Maybe they could get whatever they needed from him. Maybe even these men had limits on what they would do to American citizens. Maybe it was just a miraculous answer to his prayer. Whatever the reason, it gave Charles hope.

“Who is Hanif?” Ahmed demanded, reading from the list.

Charles stared at the floor. His face throbbed. The taste of blood trickled through his mouth.

“Who is Khartoum?” Ahmed continued.

More silence.

One of Ahmed’s men removed a sleek black stun gun from its holster. He held it inches from the base of Charles’s neck and looked at Ahmed, apparently waiting for his cue. Ahmed grinned at Charles and boasted about the weapon. It would immobilize any man, Ahmed told him, with two hundred thousand volts of electricity. And the best thing, Ahmed claimed, was that the instrument left no marks on the victim except two small burn spots where the probes of the gun contacted the skin and unleashed the electricity. Only the central nervous system would suffer permanent damage, and the cause would be difficult to prove.

Charles wondered for a fleeting instant how bad it could be.

He soon learned. And for the next twenty minutes—for what seemed like an eternity—his hope for survival faded with every passing question, with every mind-searing jolt.

“I need names of the leaders of the other church groups you have started.” Ahmed spoke deliberately and calmly, as if he knew Charles was beginning to have trouble understanding the word. “Don’t play games with me.”

The waiting was the hardest part. Knowing what was coming—the surging current of the stun gun—and being powerless to stop it. How many times had they been through this? How much more could he take? How long ago had Sarah gone down? And what would happen to her now? His mind raced, chasing questions with no answers.

Charles sensed movement behind him and convulsed at the thought of another jolt from the hated gun. “Please . . . I’m begging you.” He trembled, struggling for breath. “You’ve got to believe me. . . I don’t know what churches you’re talking about. . . . These names on the card are just friends—”

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