



Allah's Fire

By Gayle Roper

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Chapter 1

Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Master Sergeant John Cooper wondered if he'd live to see another sunset.

"You're sure this will work, Frank?" he asked the team's dark-haired explosives expert, pushing the negative thought from his mind.

"What I'm sure of, Coop, is that over one hundred children will be forcibly converted into particulate matter in less than an hour if we don't try this. That is, unless someone has a better idea."

John and Sergeant First Class Frank Baldwin both looked across the hood of their Humvee at their commander, waiting to see if he did indeed have a better idea.

Major Louis Williams stared past the two soldiers at the rusty swing set between him and the school compound. His face showed little emotion, except for a firmly clenched jaw. He said nothing for a full twenty seconds.

John's eyebrows shot up. "Well, sir?"

Williams picked up his Motorola radio and growled into it, "What have you got, Dan?"

Dan Daly, the team's sniper, answered from his observation point on the roof of an apartment building across the street from the school complex. "The leader hasn't moved. I can't tell for sure, but it looks like the sick kid they released this morning was telling the truth about the setup inside."

John looked at his watch. *Forty-seven minutes*. "If we're going to try Frank's plan, we'd better make it quick."

Major Williams turned to Frank. "Explain this thing to me again." He gestured to the cylindrical metal object lying on the hood of the Humvee. "It looks like an artillery shell casing."

Frank sighed, then spoke as one would to a slow child. "It's a miniature e-bomb, sir. Basically, it's a small Flux Compression Generator, or FCG, which is a copper tube packed with explosives, surrounded by a coil of heavy copper wire. The wire is charged with electricity just before the explosive is detonated, which creates a ramping pulse of electrical current equivalent to maybe ten or twenty bolts of lightning. That should be enough of an EMP to inhibit the use of the enemy's detonators."

Major Williams stared at him. "You're speaking English, Baldwin. I know you are. It's just not the same English I speak."

John bit back a grin. Granted Frank drove him nuts sometimes with his smarter-than-thou routine, but it had to be hard being a genius.

"I think what he's trying to say is, this thing will create an energy pulse that will toast the bad guys' toys without damaging the building or the schoolchildren. The sick kid said that he saw explosives duct taped to the concrete pillars and wall supports on the first floor, with wires running to a mat the terrorists brought in with them. It looks like the floor mat out of a car, but it has a plate of sheet metal on it. The terrorists are taking turns standing on the plate, never stepping off of it."

The major nodded. "So that must be the detonator. And these yahoos are trying to foil our snipers by setting it up so if they get knocked down, the whole place blows. And you're saying this e-bomb will disable their explosives?"

"Not the bombs, sir. Just the circuitry in the detonators."

"What if they have backup methods in place?"

"We have to assume that they do," Frank said. "But this thing will instantly render everything electronic inoperative. Batteries will malfunction, wires will melt, light bulbs will explode. The only way they could light their demo after the e-bomb goes off is with a manual nonelectric detonator, like a time fuse. Which is why we'll need to assault the building immediately once the FCG detonates."

"And be sure to use a manual detonator for our own breach," John said.

The major rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. "Have you tested this device?"

John looked at Frank, whose smarts appeared to fail him for a moment as he hesitated, then cleared his throat. "Well, not exactly, sir. The Army successfully used several larger devices like this on bases around Iraq during the initial invasion in 2003.

This one is just...um...smaller."

The major, an ex-linebacker from Auburn University, picked up the device and turned it over in his hands like a football. "Where did you get it, Frank?"

He cleared his throat again. "I built it."

Williams nearly fumbled the thing. "You *what*?"

John almost laughed at the major's expression. Frank was an acquired taste, always having a newer and better way of doing things. Sometimes he was even right.

"Well, I assembled it, anyway." Frank stared at the bomb like a man might gaze upon a beautiful woman. "I used the first stage FCG and capacitors from a low-frequency Mark-eighty-four e-bomb the Air Force...um...wasn't using."

The major slapped his Kevlar-helmeted forehead. "I'm going to get fired."

John spoke up. "He didn't steal it, sir. It fell off a forklift at the ammo supply point at Bragg back in January, and they were going to destroy it as potentially damaged.

Frank talked them into letting us have it. He's carried it with him on our last two deployments, waiting for an opportunity to try it out."

Williams spat on the ground. "Well, I don't see what other choice we have. If we go in hot and one of the terrorists falls off of his magic carpet, we lose. They've promised to blow the place unless all French and UN peacekeepers leave the country, which ain't gonna happen." He checked his watch. "So in forty-four minutes, we lose. Unless..."

He set the cylinder back on the vehicle's hood and looked toward the high cement wall surrounding the school building. "It looks like we're fourth down and fifteen and plum out of options. But how do you propose getting the e-bomb inside the building?"

"Oh, we don't need to, sir," Frank said. "That's what so great about it. It can be detonated anywhere within a hundred meters of the school." He hesitated for a moment.

"Which reminds me. There might be a few, er, *side effects*."

The major's gaze narrowed. "Like what?"

John bit the inside of his cheek to keep that smile contained.

"Like anything electronic in the area will also be cooked," Frank said.

"Anything?"

"Pretty much."

Williams didn't immediately answer, and John leaned against the Humvee, scanning the ramshackle neighborhood that surrounded the school. This part of Abidjan was predominantly Christian, but lately Muslim rebels from the north had been sowing terror here. As if these people's poverty wasn't miserable enough.

John's been all over the world in his years in the Special Forces, and except for the language on the road signs and business signs, this could be any third-world city.

They all shared a certain sense of despair, as if the people who labored to construct these rickety dwellings started out with good intentions but at some point were simply overwhelmed by the Law of Entropy and gave up.

The more places like this John visited, the more he appreciated the hopefulness he felt when he was back home. America was the land of optimism, whether its people realized it or not.

He studied the two-story cinderblock homes lining the trash-strewn street in front of the school. Most had corrugated metal roofs and no glass in their windows. Concrete walls around some dwellings showed graffiti in French and Arabic, as well as numerous pockmarks from previous violence.

The French peacekeepers were holding all civilians behind barricades they had set up two blocks away. How many of those people lived in these houses and had children in the school, their kids' lives in the hands of men willing to kill themselves to earn Allah's approval through martyrdom?

How can You let kids be treated like this, God? They're so powerless. You're supposed to protect them, aren't You?

The major nodded abruptly and reached for his radio. "I can handle a few burnt out light bulbs if we save the lives of a hundred elementary school kids."

Frank's smile was brilliant.

The major gestured toward the hardened troop transport vehicle the team had brought with them on the mission. "Frank, have the boys put anything that might get wrecked in the back of the Cougar HEV transport over there. Radios, night-vision goggles—everything electronic. Have all other vehicles pull back far enough so their components won't get fried. We might end up buying new televisions for everyone in the neighborhood, but I'm not having the rest of our whiz-bang gear taken out if I can help it.

John, keep one radio for yourself in case we have to abort."

Frank scooped up his e-bomb and trotted off toward the vehicles. The major turned back to the schematics of the school laid out over the hood of the Humvee.

"Okay, John. Get your breach team in position on the south wall. Once we blow that...er...thing, you'll need to hit the school quick before the bad guys figure out what's happened. If they realize we've killed their electronics, they just might resort to blowing this thing the old-fashioned way—if they don't shoot all the kids first, the rotten cowards!" He spoke the last two words with enough volume to be heard across the street.

Cowards was a good word. Grown people who went after kids were cowards.

Bullies. What kind of worldview held that murdering a hundred innocent school children was the path to heaven, but touching a piece of bacon could get you damned eternally?

John wasn't even sure he wanted to understand it.

On the other hand, there were people back in the States with similar philosophies—groups who believed that bombing abortion clinics scored them points with God, but owning a Rolling Stones CD was a ticket to hell. Go figure.

John didn't consider himself an expert on the Lord by any stretch, but something inside him knew that a vindictive and unjust God wasn't worth the title.

But those were questions for chaplains and clerics. At the moment, John had time for neither. If God wasn't going to keep kids and the other innocents of the world safe, he and his men would do it. He consulted his watch again.

"We've got fifteen minutes." He keyed the Motorola. "Dan, get ready. We're going for it."

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